Properzia De Rossi:

Truth and Legend Behind *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*

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Abstract

Properzia De Rossi: Truth and Legend Behind *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*

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Properzia De Rossi (1490-1530) was one of the few female sculptors active during the Italian Renaissance and the only female artist given a full biography in Giorgio Vasari's canonical work, *Lives of the Artists* (second edition, 1568), which highlights the high standing she acquired. Her piece, *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife,* commissioned by the *Fabbrica* of the San Petronio Basilica in Bologna for its façade during major renovations in anticipation of the coronation of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V is not only one of her most notable works but also her most infamous sculpture, and was ultimately excluded from the final design for reasons unclear. The origins of the commission, the design of the piece, and the reputation that surrounds it are equally unclear. The information we do have, coming primarily from Vasari, paints a muddled picture of De Rossi's legacy and reputation.

This thesis aims to answer questions surrounding the origin and motivation behind the commission, the artist's intentions in her execution of the piece, and to verify Vasari's claims and confirm whether his conflicting account is legitimate or fabricated. Further, this thesis will explore the role gender played in De Rossi's career, popularity, and reputation both surrounding this commission and outside of it. The thesis will also analyze how her position as a female artist in Renaissance Bologna may have played a role in her choices surrounding the depiction of Potiphar's wife in her *quadro*.

Acknowledgments

This thesis, which began as a simple curiosity, blossomed into an invigorating investigation into a side of the Renaissance I had never encountered. It was shaped not only through research and writing, but through the sustained support, care, and generosity of those around me.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Stowell. Your attentive guidance and unwavering presence throughout this process left a lasting mark on both this work and my development as a scholar of art history. Your constant encouragement pushed me to look more closely, think more critically, and write with greater clarity and purpose. I am deeply grateful for your investment in this project from its earliest stages to its completion.

I am also sincerely thankful to my examiner, Professor Pezolet, for the time and care taken in reading this thesis and for the insightful and generous feedback offered in response. It has been a privilege to have this work engaged with so thoughtfully.

To my family, I owe more than I can adequately express. Your unwavering support, patience, and belief in me formed the foundation that made this work possible.

To Fadi, the soul linked to mine eternally, I thank you for your love, your understanding, and your patience. You carried me through the more difficult moments with a steadiness I will always be grateful for.

To my children, one who listened attentively as I read through drafts, and the other who entered my life in the midst of this work: you have both reshaped my sense of time, perspective, and meaning in ways that extend far beyond these pages. You are a reminder of what endures beyond any single project. This thesis is, in many ways, for you.

This work stands as a testament not only to research and study, but to the relationships, care, and shared humanity that make such work possible.

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Introduction

While female artists of the Renaissance have benefitted from time in the spotlight in more recent years, Properzia De Rossi's life and work is still shrouded in mystery, confusion, and a lack of documentation.[1] Active between 1490 and 1530, her career was short lived yet impactful enough to garner the attention of Giorgio Vasari and Pope Clement VII.[2] Her most prestigious piece due to the nature of its patronage and its purpose, and the most infamous, is her bas-relief sculpture for the Basilica San Petronio in Bologna, titled *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife* (fig. 1). This commission was part of a plan to renovate the Basilica in preparation for the coronation of Charles V; De Rossi was one of the artists tasked with creating sculptures to complete the decoration of the façade.

The story behind this image is from the book of Genesis in the Old Testament and focuses on Joseph's time in Egypt as a slave in Potiphar's home. Potiphar was a part of the Pharaoh's guard and was a high-ranking official. The biblical narrative states that "Joseph found favour in his [Potiphar's] sight, and he ministered unto him. And he appointed him overseer over his house, and all that he had he put into his hand"; as this quote makes evident, there was complete trust between slave and master.[3] According to the biblical text, once Joseph became an overseer of the home, Potiphar's wife "cast her eyes upon [him]" and initiated a series of events

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[1] Modern art historians such as Babette Bohn, Frederika Jacobs, and Sally Quinn have all looked into De Rossi and her history as will be discussed below. They rely on a limited number of documents and records, thus historians are left with a lack of concrete answers.

[2] Giorgio Vasari and Peter Bondanella, *Lives of the Artists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 343.

[3] Genesis. 39:4, Revised Standard Version.

that would lead to his downfall.[4] The master's wife pursued Joseph adamantly and tried to coerce him to go to bed with her as seen in De Rossi's *quadro*. Carved into marble, this *quadro* depicts the scene in which Joseph rejects Potiphar's' wife's advances as he attempts to exit her bedroom. We see Potiphar's wife sitting on a bench on the right-hand side of the sculpture, with her right hand pulling on a piece of fabric draped across Joseph's back. She is leaning towards Joseph, with the top of her dress undone, completely revealing her breasts. Joseph is on the left-hand side of the panel, walking out of the scene, both his hands in front of him, clutching the fabric Potiphar's wife is trying to pull from him. De Rossi's depiction perfectly mirrors the account found within the Old Testament. The artist portrays Potiphar's wife as eager and forceful, paralleling the biblical text, which states that she was relentless in her attempts and that: "as she spoke to Joseph day by day, that he hearkened not unto her, to lie by her, or to be with her."[5] Joseph was steadfast in his refusals, which culminated in this moment during which, in her desperation "she caught him by his garment, saying: 'Lie with me.' And he left his garment in her hand, and fled, and got him out."[6] It was that garment she held in her hand, as described in the Old Testament, and depicted by De Rossi, which the wife would use later to accuse Joseph of rape. This accusation would not only break the trust establish between master and servant but would lead to Joseph's unjust imprisonment.

De Rossi's surprising participation among the artists renovating the Basilica in which Charles V would be coronated, a prestigious commission no doubt, is never quite explained in

[4] Genesis. 39:7, Revised Standard Version.
[5] Genesis. 39:10, Revised Standard Version.
[6] Genesis. 39:12, Revised Standard Version.

remaining archival evidence and is not further expanded on by contemporary art historians.[7] Her creation for the Basilica is interesting not only because she is the only known woman sculptor of the Renaissance to have been active let alone involved in such a project, but also due to its subject matter and visual elements.[8] For instance, her sculpture includes a nude figure, which was extremely uncommon for a woman artist to depict at that time.[9] To the best of my knowledge, no writer has investigated the possible motivations of the church authorities who offered the commission of this image to the sole woman involved in the portal decorations.

Additionally, no further explanation or information has been found to shed light on the exclusion of the sculpture from the final design, since as far as we currently know, the *quadro* never made it to its intended place on the portal.[10] It is believed that the sculpture was meant to be placed on the left-hand pilaster of the left-most portal of the Basilica. In this location, we could imagine countless attendees walking by and seeing Joseph in this most vulnerable and scandalous scene. The image might have been meant to set the stage for worship, and to act as a warning against sin. Nonetheless, considering the important occasion for which the image was commissioned, the nudity of the female subject may have been considered jarring.

This thesis aims to explore some of the questions that surround De Rossi's participation in the renovations of San Petronio, and the sculptures she produced. Why was De Rossi chosen

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[7] James H. Beck, "Jacopo Della Quercia's Design for the Porta Magna of San Petronio in Bologna," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 24, no. 2 (1965): 120.
[8] Babette Bohn, *Women Artists, their Patrons, and their Publics in Early Modern Bologna* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021), 32.
[9] Caroline Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana: A Painter and Her Patrons in Sixteenth-Century Bologna*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 22.
[10] Bohn, *Women Artists*, 36.

for this project, and why was this specific subject assigned to her? Furthermore, why was the completed work not installed? Could her gender have played a role in either of these situations? For instance, could the sexual nature of her depiction be the root cause of its exclusion? What information is available to better clarify the many factors impacting this one piece? To better understand these questions, we must look to the context of the history of the Basilica as well as De Rossi's life as an artist before her participation. Hopefully we can then begin to understand why this specific Old Testament story was assigned to the lone female sculptor, what message her depiction conveyed to both its original intended audience as well as more contemporary viewers, and its role in the sexualization of religious art defying societal norms at the time and trends in religious iconography.

By looking through primary and secondary sources this thesis will examine what kinds of issues might have surrounded the selection of De Rossi for this commission, and why the final product was never displayed as intended. In Section 1, I examine the biography of De Rossi published by Vasari in his book *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori*, and cross-reference this source with documents from sixteenth-century Bologna, and information unearthed by nineteenth and twentieth century researchers. This illuminates aspects of the unknown history and allows us to formulate a comprehensive list of questions for further study. Within this section I will also look into individual accounts of women and their experience in sixteenth-century Bologna, as well as more recent gender-focused research by feminist art historians into the time period in question, which may better illuminate the realities of De Rossi's life, the challenges she faced, and help explain choices she made and her execution in her artistic

endeavors.[11] In section 2, a deeper analysis of De Rossi's own history and legacy may provide insight into her popularity at the time, which may in turn clarify her involvement in the renovation project for the Basilica. This section will also focus on the history of Basilica San Petronio, with special attention on the events surrounding the renovation. In order to better understand why De Rossi's depiction of Joseph was controversial, Section 3 will analyze the sculpture in relationship to changing trends in religious iconography by comparing her work to other pieces completed contemporaneously.

While I hope to answer these questions by combing through primary sources, modern art historical research, the history of the Basilica itself, and an analysis of gender roles and societal expectations in sixteenth-century Bologna, the clear answers may never be obtained. Distinct separation of fact from fiction in early texts is difficult due to the lack of corroborating sources, and citations. Also, the explicit bias of those who created certain documents and texts may have tainted the record. As such, more contextual research would be needed to attempt to draw a clear and evidence-based theory to attempt to draw some type of valid conclusion. Through this research, we can better comprehend the extent that De Rossi's reputation, status, and gender had on the commission she received, and the way she depicted it.

[11] While Frederika Jacobs and the other female art historians I have cited to do not openly proclaim themselves to be feministic art historians, their work is inherently feminist because their research sheds light on the work of female artists who had been neglected by earlier historians.

Section 1- Properzia De Rossi – Women in Bologna

Our knowledge of De Rossi's life and her work is incomplete, and the available sources raise more questions than answers.[12] A biography was written about her life shortly after her death by Giorgio Vasari, however this source proves to be problematic for reasons that will be explored below. It is important that while reading his biography we compare it to other sources available to us, which can either corroborate or provide more historical context to better understand Vasari's statements, or completely dismiss them as myths. Further, we can look to the histories of other notable women from the same period in order to better understand De Rossi's lived experience and how she was portrayed by Vasari. By looking at De Rossi's life and historical context, as well the experiences and hardships she may have faced as a woman, we can better dissect the significance of this commission, as well as the way De Rossi chose to portray the biblical narrative. Women played a fundamental role in Renaissance art, culture, and patronage; however, we cannot ignore that roles between the two sexes no doubt had an effect on every aspect of daily life. To better understand the potential barriers or privileges De Rossi may have encountered throughout her career as a sculptor, I will look into historical sources pertaining to her life as well as more contemporary studies focused on gender in the Renaissance, and other accounts of notable events and women in Italian society that I believe may help shed light on the realities of a female sculptor in the sixteenth century.

[12] As will be discussed below, the majority of the information comes from either Vasari, or documents located by other art historians, for instance in the Archivio Criminale.

1.1 - Vasari and De Rossi

To better understand Properzia De Rossi, her position as a female sculptor, and her public reputation we must discuss the writings of Giorgio Vasari, Renaissance artist and historian who composed volumes of biographies memorializing Italian artists, including a biography of De Rossi in the second edition of *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori* published in 1568. De Rossi's biography raises many questions about the role of women in the Renaissance, although it is unclear which portions of the text are myth and which are facts. Vasari dedicates a stand-alone section of his book to a biography focusing on De Rossi, but in actuality her "portion" of her own *vita* is limited. Vasari instead dedicates multiple pages to the lives of women from antiquity and the Renaissance, whose achievements equaled or surpassed their male counterparts. These remarks can be interpreted as Vasari's attempt to justify his inclusion of a female artist.[13]

Although Vasari did not feel the need to justify his biographies of male artists, many of those biographies did include a preface with lessons and morals to help the reader understand and appreciate the edifying nature of the biography. As stated by Patricia Rubin in her article "Giorgio Vasari: Art and History", what was most important to Vasari was not the completely corroborated truth in every detail. Rather, in the manner in which each biography was arranged, Rubin writes, Vasari left "the artifice [to be] evident, intentionally so, for it transformed unstructured events into instructive examples."[14] Therefore, Vasari's focus on other women in

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[13] Vasari discusses many female figures form antiquity such as Sappho of Greece, Sempronia and Hortensia of Rome, and then later mentions more modern notable women such as Caterina Anguisola.
[14] Patricia Rubin, "What Men Saw: Vasari's Life of Leonardo Da Vinci and the Image of the Renaissance Artist," *Art History* 13, no. 1 (March 1990): 34.

the introduction of De Rossi's biography conveys the point that women could be just as remarkable as men; on the other hand, no explanation was needed for men's talent. What is consistent between Vasari's accounts of both male and female artists is, in the words of Gabriele Guercio, his tendency to "elucidate the artwork through the life and personality of its maker," nullifying the separation between art and the artist.[15] His account of De Rossi is a prime example of this, as he begins by outlining the stereotypical female characteristics expected in a Renaissance woman, but then deviates from this when he projects her emotions into her *quadro.*

Vasari's initial description of De Rossi portrays her as the ideal *donna* of her time: educated, polite, well mannered, and feminine. He claims that she "was not only skillful in household duties like other women, but in countless fields of knowledge, so that not only the women but all the men were envious of her."[16] He mentions her beauty and her musical abilities and mentions that her "lily white hands" worked wonders against the harshness of marble – a traditionally male-dominated medium.[17] When he writes about her achievements, he takes time to describe her intricate peach stone and cherry pit carvings (fig 2) thoroughly, showering the sculptor with praise for her attention to detail, incredible talent, and inventiveness. He recounts a carving of the Passion of the Christ in a peach stone and claims her work was "most unusual and marvelous to see, not only for the precision of her work but for the slender figures she carved on them and for her most truly delicate style of arranging them".[18] It was these pieces which, according to Vasari, would eventually lead her to be considered for San Petronio. He continues

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[15] Gabriele Guercio, *Art as Existence: The Artist's Monograph and Its Project* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009), 31.
[16] Vasari, *Lives*, 340.
[17] Vasari, *Lives,* 340.
[18] Vasari, *Lives*, 340.

to state that after receiving the commission for the facade of San Petronio, she "completed a most graceful panel, to the greatest amazement of all Bologna."[19]

Vasari's acknowledgement of De Rossi's "ready and inventive wit" is significant because it goes against a common belief regarding gender capabilities during the Renaissance.[20] This widespread assumption was that women could be intelligent but that they could not "invent" the way men did, meaning they could not have the capacity to design and execute their own depiction of a narrative the way male artists could.[21] For instance, in an article focusing on the Renaissance female artist Sofonisba Anguissola, Frederika Jacobs discusses at length how it was believed that women were not able to visualize and conceive new ideas, known as *invenzioni*; instead, they "received" them by the grace of others. [22] She goes on to state that "just as woman, the material cause, receives the 'design' of man in the creation of children, and just as the woman artist is adept at replicating (*ritrarre*) his likeness, she is similarly most competent at copying works he has created rather than generating her own."[23] Although this belief did not prohibit women from being able to invent, it was nonetheless believed that women were not predisposed to invention by their nature. The typical Renaissance belief was that nothing is invented by a woman, even her children are the product of her husband, as such praising any woman as "inventive" was rare and notable. While Vasari also discusses De Rossi as the ideal

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[19] Vasari, *Lives*, 340.
[20] Vasari, *Lives*, 340.
[21] Frederika H. Jacobs, "Woman's Capacity to Create: The Unusual Case of Sofonisba Anguissola," *Renaissance Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (1994): 95.
[22] Jacobs makes this argument by interpreting medical sources from that time; Jacobs, "Sofonisba Anguissola," 94.
[23] Jacobs, "Sofonisba Anguissola," 97.

and exceptional Italian woman, we soon find, as will be discussed below, that he contradicts himself by recounting certain slanderous rumors about the artist.

Presenting De Rossi as a beautiful and domestic woman, while also endorsing her talent and genius, Vasari creates a conflicting narrative. As Vasari continues De Rossi's history, he begins to recount the story of her involvement in the sculptures commissioned for the Basilica San Petronio prior to the coronation of Charles V. He claims that De Rossi asked her husband to act as an intermediary by making a request on her behalf to the church trustees.[24] As per Vasari, it is following her husband's intervention that De Rossi then sculpted the bust of Count Guido, the father of Alessandro De'Pepoli, either to impress him personally or to garner the church trustees' favor.[25] Having impressed the trustees with her work, they allowed her to sculpt for the basilica. Of the pieces she sculpted, *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife* is the piece that Vasari focuses on the most. He praised the piece in detail, stating "This sculpture was deemed most beautiful by everyone, and it gave her great satisfaction, since with this figure from the Old Testament she felt she had expressed in part her own most burning passion."[26] The sculpture is believed to have expressed her passion because the subject matter emulated De Rossi's life: Vasari claims that De Rossi had fallen victim to unrequited love outside her marriage. According to Vasari, De Rossi was "was very much in love with a handsome young man who, it seemed, cared little for her."[27] We can see here how Vasari's account of De Rossi's life parallels the story of Potiphar's wife:

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[24] The only information we have regarding her marriage is a certificate dated March 18th 1515, no other information is available.
[25] Marjorie Och. *Wives, Widows, Mistresses, and Nuns in Early Modern Italy: Making the Invisible Visible through Art and Patronage* (London: Routledge, 2016), 140.
[26] Vasari *Lives*, 341.
[27] Vasari, *Lives*, 341.

both women are described as lustful and chasing one-sided affection outside of their respective marriages. Vasari goes on to claim that due to a rivalry between De Rossi and Amico Aspertini, another sculptor working on San Petronio's Portal project, she refused to carve more for the basilica and was paid a "beggarly price" for her work.[28] His final comment is that upon hearing of her incredible talent Pope Clement VII asked to meet her while he was in Bologna for the coronation, but sadly the Pope found that De Rossi had died a few days prior and had already been buried in the *Ospedale della Morte.* The rest of the biography once again focuses on other women, comparing them to each other and to their male contemporaries, allowing Vasari to use De Rossi's biography to catalogue all the women he found notable.[29]

Without looking to outside sources, we can already see inconsistencies in Vasari's account. He describes De Rossi as the ideal woman, good at her chores, beautiful, a great singer – presenting her as a respectable Italian *donna.* Yet later he claims her unrequited love outside her marriage was her inspiration for *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*. Both these statements cannot be true according to Renaissance morality as defined by both the Church and Vasari himself. Once we start looking to other primary accounts of that time, we truly start to see how Vasari's narrative begins to unravel with contradictions both within the text and when compared to the external evidence. Far from a quiet, pious woman, De Rossi had a lengthy criminal record at that time, some with her supposed lover, breaking any illusions of her as a simple housewife.[30]

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[28] Vasari, *Lives*, 341.
[29] De Rossi's biography spans from pages 339 to 344 in the modern edition used for this thesis. Pages 339 and 340 discuss 38 women from both antiquity and pre-modern times that pre-date De Rossi, while pages 342 to 344 again continue to discuss other renaissance female artists and how they compare to male contemporaries.
[30] Bohn, *Women Artists*, 33.

In addition to the many contradictions, Vasari also left a lot of information out of his biography of De Rossi. We know that Bologna had a flourishing network of artistic women that I will expand on below, but Vasari does not reference that at all. While Vasari mentions that De Rossi's piece impressed all of Bologna, he never mentions that it was not displayed, leaving us with neither possible explanation for why De Rossi's piece was excluded nor an explanation on how it could have be seen and loved by all of Bologna. Was gender a factor, was it the subject matter, or a combination of both? One thing we learn from Vasari's *vita* is that it was significant for a woman to participate in the renovation of the Basilica, and for that woman to sculpt this specific story. Vasari clearly connects De Rossi and Potiphar's wife by linking their emotional turmoil. The fact that Vasari connects De Rossi to her subject so confidently might suggest that others also viewed the artist's gender and identity in relationship to the sculpture. The absences and contradictions beg the question, how much of Vasari's account is accurate? To better contextualize his biography, we must investigate what accounts remain of De Rossi's personal life and then how women, artists or not, were treated in Bologna at this time.

1.2 – Personal Life

Up until the twentieth century, art historians relied heavily on Giorgio Vasari's account of Properzia De Rossi's life and legacy. More modern art historians have taken the time to investigate primary sources and compile a more factual account of her life as far as sources allow. By looking through the work of these scholars and piecing together what they have uncovered about De Rossi's life, we can better understand the reality of her legacy and we can answer, to the best of our abilities, some of the lingering questions raised by Vasari's biography.

Art historians such as Frederika H. Jacobs, Babette Bohn, Sally Quinn, and Julia K. Dabbs provide a great deal of information regarding many female artists in Bologna as does the catalogue from the exhibition *Making Her Mark: A History of Women Artists in Europe, 1400-1800* displayed at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Laura Ragg also created a foundational piece of scholarship focusing on female Bolognese artists in 1923. As is evident by the names of these scholars, most of the research done on De Rossi and her works after the early nineteenth century has been done by women, and their research presents a very different image of De Rossi than the biography written by Vasari in the sixteenth century. When juxtaposed with Vasari's *Vite*, these sources help us to separate reality and fiction, which is necessary for understanding the circumstances surrounding De Rossi's involvement in the decorations of San Petronio and understanding her motivations behind the depiction she chose.

Vasari stated that De Rossi was born sometime around 1490 within a Bolognese family, but even this statement has been questioned. Laura Ragg has pointed out that a nineteenth-century text by Giuseppe Guidicini, entitled *Istittuzione della Cose notabile di Bologna* states that she was the daughter of Giovanni Martino Rossi da Modena, implying that her family was actually from Modena.[31] Her unclear origins foreshadow the issues we will encounter time and time again when it comes to De Rossi and her history. In her research, Ragg states that her drawing master was Marc Antonio Raimondi, pupil of Francia and friend of Raphael, but she does not write much else about her technical training.[32] Art historian Elizabeth Bernhardt also mentions Raimondi in her book *Genevra Sforza and the Bentivoglio: Family, Politics, Gender*

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[31] A publication completed in the nineteenth century focusing on notable events in the history of Bologna; Laura M. Ragg, *The Women Artists of Bologna* (London: Methuen & Co, 1907), 168.
[32] Ragg, *Women,* 168.

and Reputation in (and Beyond) Renaissance Bologna but as with Ragg fails to provide a citation or source of this information. It is also worth noting that while Raimondi was born near Bologna, he left for Venice sometime around 1506, and later went to Rome around 1510. He stayed in Rome after his arrest for having created his erotic engravings *I Modi* in 1524 until the sack of Rome in 1527 and after that no record of his movement is confirmed, diminishing the possibility that he did train De Rossi.[33] Raimondi had his own encounters with Pope Clement VII in response to his graphic engravings, but more of that will be discussed later on. The statements of Ragg and Bernhardt counter Vasari's statements, which make no mention of any training or teacher.[34] In his other biographies, he discusses masters and pupils at length, which might suggest that had he known who De Rossi's teacher was, he would have mentioned it in her biography. Her developing years are a mystery, and it is not until much later in her life that more information about her can be found.

Vasari claims that De Rossi was married, and claims that she used her husband as an intermediary for the commission of San Petronio, without any further elaboration on how he would be able to do that.[35] While we have confirmation of her marriage only by its record, we also have many confirmations in legal documents of her supposed adulterous activity. De Rossi was involved in several criminal trials and processes, which are known thanks to surviving documents from the Archivio Criminale. Court documents from April 1521, which have been verified by Babette Bohn, Frederika H. Jacobs, and Laura Ragg, point out that De Rossi was

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[33] Babette Bohn, "Raimondi, Marcantonio," (*Grove Art Online.* 2003), 1.
[34] Vasari, *Lives*, 342.
[35] Vasari, *Lives*, 340.

listed as Antonio Galeazzo Malvasia's concubine.[36] Jacobs also mentions that within the Archivio Criminale documents De Rossi, sometimes listed as De Rubris, is implicated in numerous scandalous affairs.[37] Ragg equally goes into detail regarding the accusation of De Rossi's affair with Antonio Galeazzo di Napoleone Malvasia and the criminal cases which involved them both.[38] These cases mainly focused on her disorderly conduct, including vandalizing her neighbor's garden with Galeazzo listed as her accomplice, and assaulting another artist. These court records suggest that De Rossi was perhaps confrontational, hot-tempered, and far from the quiet *donna* Vasari describes.

Beyond the Fabbrica's Register of payments to De Rossi for her completed pieces as proof of her involvement at San Petronio, to be discussed below, as detailed by Ragg in *Women Artists of Bologna*, the next and final concrete mention of De Rossi which can be corroborated surrounds her death in 1530.[39] Vasari recounts that Pope Clement VII wanted to meet De Rossi but was informed that she had regrettably died the same week and had already been buried in the *Ospedale della Morte*.[40] Babette Bohn and Frederika Jacobs both state that we have the register of De Rossi's admission to the *Ospedale di San Giobbe*, which was for syphilitic patients, in 1529.[41] Some historians refer to De Rossi having died within a plague hospital, but do not name the institution.[42] Further research shows that in sixteenth century Bologna, syphilis was treated as

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[36] Bohn, *Women Artists*, 33.
[37] As detailed in Ottavio Mazzoni Toselli's record in *Racconti storici estratti dall'archivio criminale di Bologna : ad illustrazione della storia patria*; Fredrika H. Jacobs, "The Construction of a Life: Madonna Properzia de'rossi '*Schultrice*' Bolognese," *Word & Image* 9, no. 2 (April 1993): 129.
[38] Ragg, *Women*, 171.
[39] Ragg, *Women,* 174.
[40] Vasari, *Lives*, 343.
[41] Bohn, *Women Artists*, 35; Jacobs, "Madonna Properzia," 130.
[42] Jacobs, "Madonna Properzia," 130..

a plague and as such it is entirely possible that *Ospedale di San Giobbe* was in fact a plague hospital which treated syphilitic patients.[43] The sometimes inaccurate, or unsubstantiated histories surrounding De Rossi as well as the plethora of uncited claims make it extremely challenging to establish even basic facts about her life.[44] It seems that the possibility of her having an affair with Galeazzo is likely due to the archival evidence from court proceedings. It is equally possible that De Rossi did die of syphilis considering the hospital to which she was admitted. Clearly, she worked on San Petronio, and had been paid for her work. The fact that De Rossi, we believe, had an affair outside of a marital union lends some credibility to Vasari's account of her unrequited love, or sexual nature, but many gaps remain. One wonders if Vasari knew of her reputation, and whether this directly impacted the narrative he created regarding her and the commission for San Petronio. By looking into historical accounts of other notable women in Bologna, and how stories about them were circulated, we can assess whether or not Vasari was manufacturing or manipulating De Rossi's legacy in his *Vite*.

[43]Sally Quinn and Carole Collier Frick both state that De Rossi died while being treated at a plague hospital. It is important to note that Quinn, Bohn, and Collier Frick have cited the same source for their information regarding De Rossi's place of hospitalization (see Vera Fortunati and Irene Graziani (eds), Properzia de' Rossi: una scultrice a Bologna nell'età di Carlo V (Bologna: Editrice Compositori, 2008), pp. 76–91) and Jacobs does not cite a source for her claim. It could be a mistranslation of the original Italian text, or a misunderstanding. According to Sergio Sabbatani the Ospedale di san Giobbe was used primarily for syphilitic patients during the syphilis epidemic in Bologna (see Sabbatani, Sergio. "Il contagio luetico a Bologna nel Cinquecento. L'assistenza sanitaria e sociale [Syphilis in Sixteenth-Century Bologna: Health Care and Social Assistance (Part Two)]." *Le Infezioni in Medicina* 14, no. 2 (2006): 102–110.) Could this then clarify the discrepancy as Bologna treated their syphilis outbreak as a plague?

[44] Such as those made by both Vasari and Laura Ragg, mentioned above.

1.3 – Women in Bologna

Caroline Murphy's book *Lavinia Fontana: A Painter and her Patrons in Sixteenth-Century Bologna* offers important evidence about the treatment received by female artists in Bologna and helps to contextualize De Rossi's life. This book suggests that in the Early Modern period female artists could live in a somewhat equal society with their male counterparts under certain circumstances, as was the case with the painter Lavinia Fontana. The daughter of an artist, Fontana achieved notoriety quickly in Bologna, but it was mostly due to the careful intervention and calculation of Prospero Fontana, her father. Prospero, like Tintoretto and other artists with daughters, had his daughter trained at home as women were not allowed into painter's guilds during the sixteenth century.[45] This allowed them to receive the necessary training to hone their talent, but it also allowed them to enter the world as artists "without offending conventional societal mores."[46] Murphy states that within Bolognese society and culture during the Renaissance, Lavinia was not only welcomed, but was respected and appreciated and received numerous important commissions soon after beginning as an artist.[47] Murphy then asks how women like Lavinia could flourish in such a male-dominated environment. Did male artists prefer men in their workshops under their tutelage, or did they accept women? What Murphy shows is that a large factor in the popularity of women artists, and their access to patronage, came from their home-based training under the watchful eye of their talented fathers, which allowed them to circumvent the need for professional training with other men, which may have

[45] Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana*, 14.
[46] Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana,* 13.
[47] Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana,* 18.

been seen potentially as a threat to their chastity and virtue.[48] Murphy nonetheless argues that amongst the female artists of the Renaissance which could have inspired Fontana to some extent, De Rossi would not have been an ideal role model. Artists such as Caterini Vigri, the pious artist nun who later became the patron saint of the Academia Clementina, the Bolognese painter's guild, served as better models for women in the arts. De Rossi, while known for her talented work on the Basilica, would have likely been considered as an unsuitable role model for Lavinia due to her "unhappy love affairs, citations for disturbing the peace and lonely death, probably from syphilis in a hospice."[49] Here we see once again the way De Rossi was excluded from the positive narrative surrounding budding female artists in sixteenth-century Bologna. There seems to have been a clear distinction between her and other artists whose reputations followed the norms of the sixteenth century more closely. While De Rossi seems to have suffered from a tarnished reputation, partially due to the narrative propelled by Vasari's *vita,* she was not the only woman to fall victim to slanderous rumors in Bologna at the time. To understand how Vasari's biography of De Rossi demonstrates prejudices that affected women in the sixteenth century, it is instructive to compare her to another woman of this period who was appreciated in her life and yet disparaged through posthumous rumors and stories: Genevra Sforza.

1.4 – Genevra Sforza

Genevra Sforza was the wife of Giovanni II Bentivoglio, an unofficial Lord in Bologna in the fifteenth century. During her lifetime there are numerous accounts praising her for being an ideal

[48] Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana,* 20.
[49] Murphy, *Lavinia Fontana,* 20.

woman, wife, and supporter of her statesman husband. After Bentivoglio's death and her exile from Bologna, her reputation was tarnished by a few notable writers in the sixteenth century, a reputation that followed her well into the twentieth century. While stories exist from her lifetime documenting her dutiful nature and exceptional mothering, posthumously she became known as too emotional and hysterical; she was accused of poisoning her husband, and even of "ruling" Bologna from behind the scenes.[50] Even in all these accounts of her vilification, her husband is never depicted as emasculated or weak; he is rather depicted as a man at the mercy of an "evil" woman.[51] Following the fall of the Bentivoglio and the re-unification of Bologna and Rome, Sforza became the scapegoat for all Bentivoglio's failures and his inability to sustain the city's pseudo-independence. The treatment Sforza received is a similar to that received by De Rossi. While Sforza was of a higher societal rank than De Rossi, her character was still not above criticism, even without evidence or merit. While women in Bologna were considered "freer" in their liberties and rights as compared to other Italian city states, the "approved" activities still prevented them from being involved in politics or in any position of power in any way. By being so active and vocal in Bologna, Sforza seemed to have antagonized other men, in particular religious men of high status.[52]

Historian Elizabeth Bernhardt outlines how misinformation and fabricated evidence tarnished Sforza's reputation, and even draws a comparison to De Rossi's treatment. She traces the "black legend" surrounding Sforza to soon after her husband's death and notes that these

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[50] Elizabeth Bernhardt, *Genevra Sforza and the Bentivoglio: Family, Politics, Gender and Reputation in (and Beyond) Renaissance Bologna*, Gendering the Late Medieval and Early Modern World (Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 17.
[51] Bernhardt, *Genevra Sforza*, 266.
[52] Bernhardt, *Genevra Sforza*, 259.

early stories "introduced the theme of Genevra's audacity and arrogance regarding her unwillingness to understand or accept the limits imposed on her sex."[53] Similar accusations were thrown at De Rossi; Bernhard writes that "because of Properzia's unusual participation and success in an otherwise all-male field, she was criticized and referred to as a prostitute" essentially tarnishing her history and the work she completed.[54] She goes on to compare the mistreatment of Sforza and De Rossi by stating that they "were questioned as part of a wider ranging Italian and European debate about the proper role of women in society."[55] Bernhardt does this to demonstrate the trend of manipulating history against women who, for whatever reason, held some power or acted in ways not considered the norm. She goes on to highlight how an aristocratic Bolognese man published a tome titled *Laude delle donne bolognesi* praising Bolognese women for their "accomplishments" and their higher status as women.[56] She goes on to state that "there seems to have been little space in the genre for women who were involved in the power structure—or for females living (or even imagined as living) beyond that status quo, e.g., Genevra, (…) and Properzia." If both Sforza and De Rossi were included in a "debate about the proper role of women in society," as Bernhardt proposes, then the treatment their memories received clearly demonstrate on which side of the debate these women were placed.[57] We see how women's reputations can so quickly be decimated by men in society and literature. Was De Rossi targeted equally unfairly by Vasari?

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[53] Bernhardt, *Genevra Sforza*, 270.
[54] Bernhardt, *Genevra Sforza*, 270.
[55] Bernhardt, *Genevra Sforza*, 270.
[56] Bernhardt, *Genevra Sforza*, 270. It is worth noting here Bernhardt lists the accomplishments as "beauty, blood, social standing, apparel, presentation, charm, conduct, intelligence, grace and virtue."
[57] Bernhardt, *Genevra Sforza*, 270.

If we consider Sforza's experience, could we then draw a connection to how male viewers including Vasari may have perceived De Rossi, her involvement in San Petronio, and the creation of *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*? What did it mean for De Rossi, a woman, to be included in this major project and assigned this specific image? As seen in Murphy's studies, women artists in Bologna could hold value and be treated as fairly as their male contemporaries, however the case of Sforza shows that attitudes over women could be ambivalent. Could the choice of subject and the reason for its exclusion be linked to De Rossi's gender?

While Sforza maintained herself proudly as head of her household, her inability to fade quietly in the background allowed her critics to destroy her character. Similarly, De Rossi as a female sculptor in a heavily male dominated art scene who also had been involved in legal quarrels, as seen by her criminal records, might have been a prime candidate for gossip and slander. Women should be quiet and humble in all things, and De Rossi was not. De Rossi's and Sforza's treatment is a testament to the structure of Bolognese society and just how deeply ingrained patriarchal norms and expectations dictated women and their place. Unlike the female artists mentioned above, born of great and accomplished fathers in the arts, trained at home, and focusing on more "female aimed" art styles such as portraiture, De Rossi was not awarded the same respect.

Section 2 – San Petronio: History, Works, and De Rossi's Contribution

2.1 – San Petronio and De Rossi's Quadro

De Rossi's contribution to the façade of San Petronio is her most well-documented commission; many questions remain, however, about her earlier works. Laura Ragg states that De Rossi was invited by the vice-legate to decorate the high altar of the church that had just been restored outside the gate of S. Stephano. She goes on to claim that the intricate wreathes carved by De Rossi were placed on the altar in the church of Santa Maria del Baraccano.[58] This claim has no footnote or citation and is not made in any other biographies or publications about De Rossi, and as such we cannot confirm it. Whether De Rossi carved for Santa Maria del Baraccano or not, we know that she was involved in another church's major works, that of the Basilica of San Petronio. While we know that De Rossi was active and working due to the pieces found and attributed to her, a comprehensive list of her works is unavailable. Bohn and Jacobs take care to mention her most well-known works, but the majority information about her commissions, especially from religious institutions, is lost.

Documentation surrounding De Rossi increases in the 1520s due to her involvement in the façade of the Basilica of San Petronio in Bologna. While this does help illuminate some circumstances of her most famous, and possibly final, commission it is still lacking in information and crucial details to help us better understand the piece and contextualize it.

As discussed earlier, Vasari claims that De Rossi's sculpture of Count Guido, created as a result of her husband's intervention, led to her involvement in the façade of San Petronio. Laura

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[58] Ragg, *Women*, 173.

Ragg on the other hand states that there was a contest in Bologna calling artists to send in samples of their work in order to join the renovations, but no document mentioning this contest can be traced back to San Petronio or the church committee.[59] Babette Bohn, on the other hand, reports that according to Mazzoni Toselli, De Rossi received the commission for San Petronio thanks to her lover Antonio Galeazzo Malvasia.[60] Unfortunately, without further research that is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is difficult to know which of these claims is accurate.

Once we start looking into what De Rossi sculpted for the façade, things are thankfully a bit clearer. As noted above, Vasari states De Rossi sculpted the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, indicating that the design of the piece was her own invention, but does not state whether De Rossi chose the subject herself.[61] We know that De Rossi sculpted many pieces for the doors, including angels and sibyls which were included on the final portal, as mentioned by Vasari and seen in the invoices of the designs paid for by the Basilica.[62] Frederika Jacobs and Laura Ragg, have examined the Fabbrica's register which show us that other designers were paid for all pieces De Rossi completed apart from *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*, suggesting strongly that she designed this sculpture herself.[63] Babette Bohn also confirms it is unlikely that De Rossi designed all the pieces she created for the façade of an Petronio.[64]

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[59] Ragg goes on to say that was when De Rossi created the marble likeness of Count Guido which "won" her involvement in the renovations, and that the bust may be the bust preserved in the first room of the Museo della Fabbrica, but more probably is in the villa of the Pepoli. Ragg, *Women,* 168.
[60] Ottavio Mazolli Toselli was an Italian historian born in the late eighteenth century. He published he published multiple books documenting Bolognese art, culture, and notable members of society in the early nineteenth century. Among his works he also published De Rossi's criminal records in 1868; Bohn, *Women Artists*, 34.
[61] Vasari, *Lives*, 342.
[62] The records are detailed in Carlo Cesare Malvasia's 1678 work *Felsina Pittrice* and have been translated and reproduced.
[63] Jacobs, "Madonna Properzia," 127; Ragg, *Women*, 171.
[64] Bohn, *Women Artists*, 33.

According to Mark Gregory D'Apuzzo, De Rossi' bas relief was meant to be on the left-hand pilaster of the left portal, which is known thanks to the payment documents preserved in the archives of the Vestry Board of San Petronio.[65] The excerpt from D'Apuzzo goes on to confirm her piece was never placed into its intended position on the door jamb but instead, according to Oretti, an Italian art historian of the eighteenth century, was placed in the room of the notary of the Vestry Board adjacent to the door of the Pavaglione.[66] Vasari makes no mention of fact that the panel was not installed around on the portal, and instead comments on the praise the piece received.

Could it have been excluded due to the way De Rossi implicated her own emotions or life into the piece, if others perceived the story Vasari told to be true? Art historian Charles Hope explains within his book *Religious Narratives in Renaissance Art* that the practice of using the features or likeness of real people in religious stories was condemned by the Church.[67] If it was believed that De Rossi's had in some way projected herself into the story by expressing her emotions via Potiphar's wife, this might give a reason for the piece to be excluded. The sculpture might also have been excluded because the image went against the norm for religious art at the time, which we will discuss in a later chapter.

Vasari claims that De Rossi was asked to carve more marble for the portal, but that she did not. Vasari also mentions that she was envied and discouraged by Amico Aspertini, who interestingly is also mentioned in the documents of the Archivio Criminale, as a witness against

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[65] Carole Collier Frick, Stefania Biancani, and Elizabeth Goldson Nicholson, *Italian Women Artists: From Renaissance to Baroque* (Milano, NY: Skira ; Rizzoli, 2007), 92.
[66] Frick, *Italian Women Artists*, 93.
[67] Charles Hope, "Religious Narrative in Renaissance Art," *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 134, no. 5364 (1986): 810.

her and her "lover".[68] In one of the cases, Aspertini spoke as a witness against her, claiming to have heard the altercation between De Rossi and the artist she assaulted, Vincenzo Miola.[69] While we have some information regarding her work for the Basilica, we are not certain why or how De Rossi was assigned the subject of *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*, why she was given permission to design this story and not the other subjects she was assigned, and why the image was not installed in its intended location.

Considering the amount of mystery that shrouds De Rossi's life, which leaves researchers confused about De Rossi's commission of such an erotic piece, the best option may be looking directly into the history of San Petronio. The coronation of Charles V in San Petronio marked a great change for Bologna and its relationship to the Vatican. The Basilica of San Petronio was emblematic of a time when Bologna was independent and prosperous, as well as serving as a focal point for veneration of the city's patron saint. Since its inception it has undergone frequent projects and changes, which continue even to this day. It is important to note the Basilica De Rossi worked on differed greatly from the one began in the fifteenth century by Jacopo della Quercia, who was commissioned with the design, and continued to change after her involvement due to many renovations and changed architectural plans. The Basilica saw the contributions of many architects, and *Fabbricas*, across several building projects, which evolved with the city as well as with artistic trends throughout the Renaissance and Baroque periods. The result is an amalgamation of architectural and decorative styles.

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[68] Bohn, *Women Artists*, 33.
[69] Jacobs, "Madonna Properzia," 125.

2.2 – Bologna and the Vatican

Bologna's history within Italy and the Papal State was tumultuous before and during the time of the Renaissance. In 1390, Bologna declared itself an oligarchy free of the control of the Vatican and as such established itself as its own independent state, leading to the construction of a new city center.[70] This area was meant to be central space where the citizens of Bologna could convene, surrounded by civic buildings. At its heart was the Basilica named after the city's patron saint, San Petronio. Thus in 1390, the construction of the Basilica began, though the initial design changed as new architects continued the project. Bologna maintained its independence from the Vatican until the fifteenth century.[71] It was then that it capitulated to Pope Nicholas V with a constitution that retained a symbolic independence but shared power between the papal legate and the local oligarchic body, *the reggimento.*[72] This transformed Bologna to a republic in contract only, giving a pseudo authority to the *reggimento* while still allowing it to be under papal control. This false autonomy was short lived, and at the beginning of the sixteenth century Bologna was reincorporated as a papal state, and the oligarchy was oppressed. The renewed authority of the Pope in Bologna was further cemented with the coronation of Charles V, the last holy roman emperor crowned by a Pope, held in San Petronio (fig 3).

The political changes in Bologna happened in parallel to changes in the architectural plan and construction changes of the architectural plan and construction of San Petronio. The initial plan was created during Bologna's independence, and subsequent revisions occurred throughout

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[70] Nicholas Terpstra, "Civic Self-Fashioning in Renaissance Bologna: Historical and Scholarly Contexts," *Renaissance Studies Vol 13,* no. 4 (1999): 390.
[71] Terpstra, "Renaissance Bologna," 391.
[72] Terpstra, "Renaissance Bologna," 391.

the period of pseudo-autonomy. Finally, under the new collaboration with the Vatican for the coronation, major changes were initiated so that the Basilica would mimic St Peter's. Bologna itself became a host for both Pope Clement VII and Charles V in the weeks leading up to the coronation and within that time works commenced on the completion and redesign of the Basilica to better suit the new papal needs. If we examine the various changes to the portal of the basilica, beginning with Jacopo della Quercia's initial design and moving through time to the final elements implemented in the seventeenth century, we can better understand the aims of the larger project to which De Rossi was contributing.

2.3 – History of San Petronio

The initial works for the portals of San Petronio were undertaken by sculptor Jacopo della Quercia and his designs were the first submitted for elements inside and outside the Basilica. In 1425, Jacopo della Quercia submitted his original plan for the three portals on the main façade of the church which were approved.[73] Art historian James Beck, who has researched and written on the subject extensively, provides us enough information to also see how between 1425 and 1429 the plans changed due to discrepancies between the number of stones purchased compared to what the original design required, which would be used to carve the bas-relief pieces for each pilaster.[74] As noted by Beck, della Quercia had designed the pilasters to each contain seven scenes from the Old Testament, which remained unchanged even during the renovation for which De Rossi was commissioned, however the number was reduced to five in the final

[73] Beck, "Jacopo Della Quercia's Design," 117.
[74] Beck, "Jacopo Della Quercia's Design," 119.

executed design, which corresponds to the different amount of material purchased compared to della Quercia's original design.[75] For the main portal of the basilica, della Quercia designed a number of panels for the pilasters which were installed between 1425 and 1430.[76] These include numerous scenes from the Old Testament: the creation of Adam, creation of Eve, and the Original Sin (fig 4) amongst others. These scenes from the Old Testament were juxtaposed with the architrave above the portal which included five scenes from the New Testament, including The Nativity and The Adoration of the Magi. It could be that these panels served to educate those entering the church, introducing them to the importance of salvation, but also reminding them of the origins of sin in humanity while upholding the importance of the divine. In these panels both male and female figures, representing Adam and Eve, are presented nude, however these figures are not as detailed as the figures on De Rossi's panel, possibly due to deterioration. The use of nudity in della Quercia's sculptures, however, may have influenced De Rossi to incorporate nudity into her design. Beck goes on to explain that after della Quercia's death, we have no new information until the sixteenth century regarding the renovation and completion of the façade.

Records discussing the completion of the works once again appear in 1510 when the new architect, Arduino Arriguzzi, is mentioned in documentation surrounding the Basilica.[77] There is scant information about his role as architect, and what involvement if any he had in the façade and renovations while De Rossi was involved, or which other architects may have been involved. One publication by Georg Germann, art historian, and professor of architecture, mentions that Ercole Seccandenari was brought on as the architect in 1521, allowing us to deduce he most

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[75] Beck, "Jacopo Della Quercia's Design," 116.
[76] James H. Beck, *Jacopo Della Quercia*, vol. II (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 290.
[77] Beck, "Jacopo Della Quercia's Design," 122.

likely was involved in the work of the façade in tandem with De Rossi's involvement.[78] This is the only mention of Seccandenari I have found, and Germann claims that his involvement is confirmed in the histories written by Giovanni Gaye in 1840 and by Angelo Gatti in 1933.[79]

In another article written by James Beck, he mentions in passing that a Bolognese sculptor, Domenico Aimo da Varignana, was brought into the campaign of 1510 to help finish the façade of San Petronio.[80] Beck goes on to state he was commissioned with providing the life sized statue of St Ambrose to accompany della Quercia's St Petronius and his style matched the original architect so well they were considered della Quercia's for many years.[81] There is no other mention of Aimo, so we are unable to confirm if he worked with Arriguzzi, Seccandenari, neither or both.

2.4 – Charles V, Pope Clement VII, and San Petronio

The imperial coronation of Charles V was one of the most monumental moments of the sixteenth century. It marked not only the establishment of a leader of a unified Christian world, but also the re-unification of Bologna and the Vatican. The ceremony itself, held in San Petronio, was proceeded by lengthy and detailed negotiations and planning to ensure the utmost perfection in the coronation of the new monarch of the Christian world. The pope himself transferred to

[78] Georg Germann, *Vitruve et le vitruvianisme: Introduction À l'histoire de la théorie architecturale* (Lausanne: Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes, 2016), 136.
[79] Germann, *Vitruve et le vitruvianisme,* 137.
[80] James H. Beck, "Cardinal Alidosi, Michelangelo, and the Sistine Ceiling," *Artibus et Historiae* 11, no. 22 (1990): 70.
[81] Beck, "Cardinal Alidosi," 70.

Bologna for three months before the coronation to prepare for the emperor upon his arrival.[82] With both the Pope and the emperor staying in Bologna at the *Palazzo de' Signori,* the city became the center of Christendom, bringing importance and status to the Bolognese and their civic identity and self-image. The coronation of the last Holy Roman Emperor crowned by a Pope was not meant to be held in Bologna, but the changing religious landscape in western Europe forced the emperor's hand. By changing the coronation from a lavish affair in St Peter's Basilica to a smaller, more muted affair with only a few of his vassals and none of his imperial electors present, Bologna was given an opportunity for a certain revival.[83] The changes began in Bologna upon Charles V's arrival into the city center. The choice of San Petronio seemed an obvious one, not only due to its central location and size allowing a larger viewership than other churches like the cathedral of San Pietro, but also due to its patron saint. While San Petronio was a fifth-century saint and was not considered widely important or notable, he had been bishop of Bologna in the fifth century and was considered the city's protector.[84] Where better to crown the "protector" of the Christian world than within the Basilica protecting Bologna? Now that Bologna had been selected for the coronation, and the Basilica confirmed as the site, work needed to be done in order to accommodate it. The sack of Rome in 1527, as well as the opinion of its scorned citizens against the emperor, directly impacted the site for the coronation. Due to Rome being left in ruins by the imperial army, Charles V had no choice but to find another venue

[82] Konrad Eisenbichler, "Charles V in Bologna: The Self-Fashioning of a Man and a City," *Renaissance Studies,* Vol. 13*,* no. 4 (1999): 432.
[83] Eisenbichler, "Charles V", 433.
[84] Ralph W. Mathisen, "Petronius, Hilarius and Valerianus: Prosopographical Notes on the Conversion of the Roman Aristocracy," *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 30, no. 1 (1981): 106.

to host this monumental and defining moment.[85] According to Tiziana Bernardi, a complete renovation needed to be done because "the Bolognese church had to become St Peter's in Rome" While additions were made to mimic St Peters, no permanent changes of the church's structure were done.[86] Changes to the actual fabric of the church consisted of attempts to complete the entrance, which is where De Rossi's involvement comes into play.[87]

It is entirely possible that this piece was excluded because of the way the story is depicted. With no answers surrounding the architects or *Fabriccas* involved, the commissioning of works, or the motivation of the artist we are once again left in the dark, enlightened only by our unsubstantiated conclusions. With the little documentation surrounding the Basilica and its portal renovation and construction during the early sixteenth century, we must rely on what has been recorded in order to deduce why De Rossi was included in the works and why her subject was depicted in such a risqué fashion. Was De Rossi's gender a factor in the commission or the assigned subject matter? Having examined all the available evidence about the renovations, we simply cannot say whether her gender was a factor in the fact that she received the commission for this story. What we can confirm is that the lack of payment for a design for De Rossi's panel combined with Vasari's praise of her inventiveness leads us to conclude with certain confidence that she did design it herself, imposing her own idea of how Joseph and his encounter with

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[85] André Chastel, *The Sack of Rome: 1527* (Princeton, N. J: Princeton University Press, 1983), 183.
[86] Tiziana Bernardi, "Analisa di una cerimonia pubblica. L'incoronazione di Carlo V a Bologna," *Quaderni Storici* 21, no. 61 (1) (1986): 182.
[87] There is a major lack in written records or details surrounding the church, the renovation it underwent, the funding for it, and plans for future works. This lack of permanent record may be due to the nature of the coronation itself: hastily put together and considered by some a more theatrical than significant. We do know that the original purpose of the Basilica as designed by Della Quercia differed greatly in purpose than what would have been needed during the coronation as originally this basilica was meant to be a focal point of an independent
Bologna, no longer under Vatican rule.

Potiphar's wife transpired. Whether she chose the subject or not, the former being unlikely, is irrelevant. Her decisions surrounding the depiction are what matter, and the only way to truly understand if these decisions were from her own "genius," or rather if she was following current trends, would be to compare her sculpture to other depictions of Joseph and Potiphar's wife within the same time frame. The only way we can understand De Rossi's piece is to contextualize it amongst other by her contemporaries. Comparing her design to typical religious iconography of the time, may help us understand and define De Rossi's intention with her design.

Section 3 – Religious Iconography and the Story of Joseph

Was De Rossi's depiction of *Joseph* different form other artists, and if so, was this the reason Vasari claimed that she projected her own emotions into the sculpture? Also, could this be the reason the panel was excluded from the portal? To be able to answer these questions, we will investigate the original story within the Old Testament, the role religious narratives were meant to play in art during the Renaissance, as well as other art pieces depicting this same story in the century surrounding De Rossi's rendition. The most difficult element of this comparison is that artistic renditions of this story form Joseph's life do not seem to have been created for churches in the century surrounding De Rossi's creation.[88] While Joseph was thought of as a prefiguration of Christ – which made his story a popular subject for artistic depictions in a religious setting – the scene of Potiphar's wife was often excluded. Comparisons between Joseph and Christ exist from the time of John Chrysostom who alluded to Joseph's suffering as a foreshadowing of what was to come.[89] Similar ideas appear later in literature by John Calvin, who stated that "in the person of Joseph, a lively image of Christ is presented."[90] Joseph's life and the stories within it were revered and respected due to his status as a foreshadowing of Christ and how he was steadfast through much adversity. Depictions of the complete narrative, however, are uncommon since many exclude his encounter with Potiphar's wife. While the story of Joseph's rejection of Potiphar's wife and subsequent punishment demonstrates his level of chastity, piety, and strength, the subject matter was sexual in nature, and possibly it was considered challenging to

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[88] A detailed comparison to all available depictions from this time-frame will be done further in this section.
[89] John Chrysostom and Robert C. Hill, *Homilies on Genesis, 46-67* (Baltimore: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 191.
[90] John Calvin, *Commentaries on The First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM. B. Eerdmans, 1948), 261.

portray it “respectfully”. This leads us to question even more why this story was assigned to a female sculptor for the Basilica, let alone included in the narrative.

3.1 – The Story of Joseph

The story of Potiphar’s wife was integral to defining Joseph’s character, as detailed in *Joseph: Portraits Through the Ages* by Alan T. Levenson.[91] Levenson also analyses the wife’s motivation and attempts to undo her vilification by contextualizing her actions; rather than focusing on the accuracy of the story, Levenson explores the purpose the story served, a moral lesson to readers to remain true to their virtues and integrity and resist all temptation no matter the cost. He goes on to say that her motives for her accusations against Joseph are never brought to light. Instead, the lack of attention to Potiphar’s wife and her motive is directly linked to her importance, as “the biblical author denies her a proper name— often a signal of where the Bible intends the focus not to be paid.”[92] Further he states that this “interlude serves mainly as a vehicle to propel Joseph back into jail” and as such the true reason behind the female antagonist’s actions are frivolous, the only point that holds value is Joseph's journey.[93] Levenson looks into changes between the narrative in Christianity and Islam as well as how Joseph and other characters were portrayed and treated throughout the story. The all-around treatment of also Potiphar’s wife and her narrative is of particular importance to us because her vilification and treatment mirrors that of De Rossi by Vasari. De Rossi's depiction may also have been influenced by other pieces of that time, but considering the religious setting of San Petronio,

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[91] Alan T. Levenson, *Joseph: Portraits through the Ages* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2016), 74.
[92] Levenson, *Joseph*, 76.
[93] Levenson, *Joseph*, 76.

would the church have commissioned her to sculpt an image like previous renditions of the subject, which tended to be very sexual?

3.2 – Religious and Private Depictions

Looking at other depictions of Joseph and Potiphar's wife in the century surrounding De Rossi's version, we find unsurprisingly that there were no other known female artists who depicted this story. We further confirm that there were few documented pieces created for a religious setting or commissioned by religious institutions, though this does not mean that more did not exist. It does, however, leads us to believe that this subject was not excessively popular. The depictions that exist which include nudity were created only for private spheres, by patrons outside the church. When looking at works that may have been used in a secular setting created in the 50 years before and after the creation of De Rossi's panel, including a collection of tapestries created for the Medici, and pieces by artists such as Tintoretto and Bronzino, we see variations in the depiction of Potiphar's nudity and aggressiveness.

3.2.1 – Before De Rossi – Raphael Sanzi and Biagio D'Antonio

Two depictions of the event between Joseph and Potiphar's wife that pre-date De Rossi's sculpture is by Biagio D'Antonio in 1485 and Raphael Sanzio in 1519.[94] The piece by D'Antonio, titled *The Story of Joseph* (fig 5), would have been on display within a private home, and so the expectations for how it would be composed would have differed from that of De Rossi's very public *quadro*. *Joseph and the Wife of Potiphar* (fig 6) created by Raphael for the

[94] Nicole Dacos and Josephine Bacon, *The Loggia of Raphael: A Vatican Art Treasure*, (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 2008), 155.

Loggia of the Vatican, a somewhat private but nonetheless religious setting might have carried some of the same expectations.

D'Antonio's *spalliera* panel depicting multiple scenes of the story of Joseph's life form the Old Testament would have most likely been hung in a private residence, in a bedroom installed as wainscotting.[95] The panel includes seven stories following Joseph's life, beginning with his arrival in Egypt and ending with the reunion with his brothers. Instead of following a linear narrative, D'Antonio artfully uses the space and creates "zones" for each story, clearly defining each narrative without use of harsh borders. Among these stories, we find Potiphar's wife, in the center towards the upper section of the panel. The story is told with minimal detail or elaboration: we simply see a fully clothed Joseph exiting a door followed by an equally clothed female figure reaching out to him. The depiction is quite muted compared to other depictions we will look to later on in this section due to the modesty of the figures. D'Antonio's panel, because of its subject matter, and placement, had been considered possibly to be a *cassone* panel but later scholars believe instead it was used as decoration above a wainscotting.[96] Joseph being used as a subject in marital art could be linked to his loyalty, devotion, and chastity in the face of temptation, as we see in his rejection of the advances by Potiphar's wife. While this panel was made for a completely private, secular setting, the depiction of the scene is extremely conservative. There is no nudity, and Joseph with Potiphar's wife are not in a bedroom in close and intimate quarters. The only connection between aggressor and victim is Potiphar's wife's

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[95] Andrea Bayer, *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy* (New York, New Haven: Metropolitan Museum of Art ; Yale University Press, 2008), 398.
[96] John Pope-Hennessy and Keith Christiansen, "Secular Painting in 15th-Century Tuscany: Birth Trays, Cassone Panels, and Portraits," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 38, no. 1 (1980): 16.

grasp on Joseph's clothing. When compared to Raphael's piece for a private apartment within the Vatican, we can see how the depiction of this story evolved over time, even in a private setting.

Raphael Sanzio's piece found within the loggias, the open-air corridors in the Apostolic Palace, were part of the living quarters of the Pope. While this area was not for public view, a certain level of piety might still be expected considering that the viewers might include the Pope, his court, and other members of the church and their guests within the Vatican.[97] Considering when this piece was created and for whom, we can assume a certain level of decorum was necessary, although the need might not have been exactly the same as it would be compared to a public religious setting. When we consider that the Basilica of San Petronio was meant to emulate Saint Peter's Basilica for the coronation of Charles V, one might expect that the sculptures of San Petronio would visualize the religious stories with a similar level of decorum. Instead, Sanzio's piece is more conservative in nature, in contrast to De Rossi's design. The fresco has Potiphar's wife on the right, sitting on a bed, fully clothed. Her right arm reaches out to Joseph grasping at his clothing, and her face shows shock, perhaps even disappointment. Joseph is on the left, attempting to evade her grasp. His arms are outstretched before him, while he looks back mouth agape, shocked or even scared of her. This subtly depicts the story artfully, using suggestive positions, the setting, and expression on the subjects' faces to tell the story. Because it shows no nudity, this carefully composed version would cause no issues being displayed in the Vatican and would have surely been appreciated as a respectful way to honor the

[97] Dacos and Bacon, *The Loggia of Raphael*, 15.

story without artistic liberties or lewdness. A print of Sanzio's design dating from anywhere between 1490 and 1519 also exists. The print (fig. 7) was completed based off Sanzio's design but was executed by Marc Antonio Raimondi. Instead of following this as a model, De Rossi veers into dangerous territory, designing her own piece and pushing the boundaries of religious iconography meant for religious settings. While De Rossi may have known about the print, it is unlikely that any real connection exists between her and Raimondi. The discussion of Raphael's work is included in this thesis not to suggest that De Rossi had prior knowledge of this piece, but rather simply to draw a comparison between two images depicting the same subject for a religious setting.

3.2.2 – Agnolo Bronzino

Of the pieces examined here, Agnolo Bronzino's version of the story was created closest to the date of De Rossi's, and his is even more explicit in nature. Created in 1549 for the Medici family's private collection for one of Cosimo's "grandest rooms" in his private quarters, the tapestry depicting the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife (fig. 8) is chaotic, colorful, and contains explicit nudity.[98] Within it we see an ornately decorated room leaving no empty space within the scene. The bed, with a voluminous canopy similar to the one sculpted in De Rossi's piece, is found on the right-hand side and upon it sits Potiphar's wife completely exposed, with only a small piece of fabric covering her pubis. Her right leg is bent on the bed while her left barely touches the floor. Her hips and torso are raised while both arms reach out to Joseph, her right arm pulling the fabric from his back while her left tugs at the piece draped across his torso.

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[98] Graham Smith, "Cosimo I and the Joseph Tapestries for the Palazzo Vecchio," *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme* 6, no. 3 (1982) 187.

Her mouth is open and instead of the longing we see in De Rossi's piece, we see a more exaggerated expression, perhaps suggesting frustration or anger. Joseph is depicted on the left, attempting to flee the scene. His legs step away from the bed, and his left arm reaches forward, suggesting the haste with which he is trying to escape. His right hand is prying off Potiphar's wife's left hand from his garment. He looks back at her, mouth slightly parted, eyes wide as if in shock. Considering the fact that, in the tapestry-making process, an image is "flipped", it is quite likely that the original design Bronzino provided for the tapestry makers resembled De Rossi's *quadro* even more closely. This piece would have been hung within the Medici's private estate and as such could be depicted in such a graphic and detailed way. Part of a collection of pieces depicting Joseph's life, the storyline is similar to that of the portal of San Petronio. That and the sexual nature of the work are the only similarities we can find between the pieces. Could the similar elements found in De Rossi's piece have been the reason for its exclusion? Considering this more explicit style was appropriate for private viewing and not public display, let alone in a religious setting, could a contemporary viewer of De Rossi's sculpture have found it overly erotic and inappropriate?

3.2.3 – Jacopo Robusti Tintoretto

Next, we can look to the painting by Jacopo Robusti Tintoretto *Joseph and the Wife of Potiphar* (fig. 9) painted in 1555. Similar to the piece by Bronzino, this was created in a collection we can conclude was used in a secular setting as a "furniture painting" used primarily for decoration.[99]

[99] These images were created in a collection for the "grandest room in [Cosimo's] own quarters." They would be seen by Cosimo and any notable guests he would host but not for public view, and not in a more religious setting. See Smith, "Cosimo I,": 183; Robert Echols et al., *Splendor, Myth, and Vision: Nudes from the Prado* (Williamstown, MA, Madrid: Clark Art Institute ; In collaboration with Museo Nacional del Prado, 2016), 78.

In it we see Potiphar's wife on the left side again, lying on a bed. She is completely nude, without even an artfully placed garment to maintain some of her modesty. Her left arm supports her upper body and covers her left breast while her right arm reaches out towards Joseph, and she holds a tuft of his clothing in her fist. Joseph in this piece is not shown as fleeing but rather he is facing her, his knees almost pressed up against the bed. His torso is violently pulling away, with his right arm hugging the fabric she's holding, trying to pull it out of her hands. Unlike Bronzino, Tintoretto uses more muted neutral tones which allow the viewer's eyes to focus on the two subjects. Once again, we see an explicit version of the story which would undoubtedly hang in private home due to the erotic elements of the depiction. It is also important to note that this piece was created while the Council of Trent was ongoing, which would eventually create a decree about sacred art used in ecclesiastic settings. While new artistic standards had not been cemented, there had been debates about nudity in religious iconography and public opinion changed.[100] The decree of the Council of Trent on sacred art eventually confirmed in 1563 that while images were useful in worship, they needed to be "appropriate to their setting and subject" in order to remain respectful as a tool for veneration and piety.[101] The details within the decrees of the Council were, however, vague, and this led to individualized interpretations of the rules and their implementation—what one Pope or bishop found acceptable may very well be admonished and rejected by the next. Considering this, how can one define what is and is not

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[100] This statement refers to, as one example, Pietro Aretino's discourse surrounding Michelangelo's Fresco for the Sistine Chapel, as detailed by Jesse Locker in his book *Art and Reform in the Late Renaissance after Trent.*
[101] John W O'Malley, "Trent, Sacred Images, and Catholics' Senses of the Sensuous," in *The Sensuous in the Counter-Reformation Church*, ed. by Marcia B. Hall and Tracy E. Cooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 28.

appropriate? Could De Rossi's panel have been excluded because its nudity transgressed values that were emerging in the period leading up to Trent? Or could it have been vehemently rejected due to the elements within its depiction which seem to counter the norms in sixteenth-century religious art?

3.2.4 – Depictions after Trent - Guido Reni and Orazio Gentileschi

There are two paintings completed in 1630 that focus on the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, one of which is known to have been created for a private setting. While both paintings focus on the two protagonists alone with minimal decoration in the background, the styles of each are in sharp contrast, further demonstrating how artistic liberties and invention were taken regarding this narrative even after the council of Trent.

Orazio Gentileschi painted *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife* (fig 10) for the home of Queen Henrietta in Greenwich, while he worked in the court of Charles I.[102] In this painting we see Potiphar's wife on the left portion, strewn across an unmade bed, with her torso and breasts exposed, clinging to the fallen piece of fabric she most likely pulled off of Joseph in an attempt to drawn him near to her. On the right, we see Joseph pushing aside a heavy red drape, looking back at his temptress over his left shoulder, exiting the scene. Potiphar's wife looks to him longingly, her cheeks flushed, with the top of her dress pulled down and the bottom half caught beneath her, exposing her bare legs. There is sensuality in this painting not only in the nudity of the female antagonist, but also but the deep stare she gives to Joseph and the red fabric adorning the background. As we have seen with other renditions above, the nudity in the piece is not at all

[102] Keith Christiansen and Judith Walker Mann, *Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi* (New York, New Haven: Metropolitan Museum of Art ; Yale University Press, 2001), 34.

surprising as we can confirm it was made for a private secular setting. When compared to Reni's piece, we can see how different artists transformed this narrative and expressed the longing and sexual tension differently.

Guido Reni's painting *Joseph and Potiphar's wife* (fig 11) is also from 1630. Within it we can immediately see the changes the Council implemented on art and visual limitations surrounding religious narratives, as Potiphar's wife's chest is fully covered. This painting was part of the Costaguti collection, but the original patron is unknown.[103] Considering the fact that this painting depicts erotic elements with greater restraint, this image could have potentially been in a religious setting without any cause for concern or scrutiny. Here we see Potiphar's wife on the right, fully clothed apart from her left shoulder which is exposed. Her left arm reaches forward while her left-hand grips Joseph's clothing. Her right arm is pressed against her abdomen while her head is slightly tilted, looking over at Joseph suggestively. Joseph is on the left, with his upper body recoiling from the female subject. His left hand is raised in protest while his right hand attempts to pull the fabric free from her grip. The background includes a red-toned drape, similar to Gentileschi's piece, but that seems to be the only similarity between the two paintings. With Reni, we see a very muted re-telling of the story, creating a visual that would adhere to the more chaste norms of the time.

Across all these renditions, we can see how religious iconography changed throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The impact of tumultuous religious climates had a rippling effect directly impacting artists throughout Italy. While De Rossi's image stands out due

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[103] D. Stephen Pepper, *Guido Reni: A Complete Catalogue of His Works with an Introductory Text* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 253.

to its nudity, it would not have been the only rendition with those elements, simply the only one made for a public religious setting. The female nudity might have been the defining feature in what makes a depiction of Joseph and Potiphar's wife as acceptable or not for a religious setting. Nude women have been a point of contention within art history of the Renaissance, both in painting and in sculpture. Sculptures of female nudes could be the focus of male lust to such a degree that they had to be hidden from public view. I believe we can draw a comparison between how sculptures like the Venus de Medici were treated to better understand both the dominant attitude towards female nudes but also to the mentality of male viewers at the time.

3.3 – The Venus de Medici and Societal Responses to Nudity

The first century Roman copy of the statue of Aphrodite attributed to Praxiteles (fig 12) from the fourth century BCE was found in an excavation in the late sixteenth century. Following the discovery, it was placed in the Medici Villa in Rome and was thereafter known as the Venus de Medici. While it stood proudly in the Villa for some time it was ultimately removed to the Florentine Tribuna by 1677 due to the "abuse" it suffered at the hands of its viewers.[104] The statue needed to be moved to ensure its safety, as men could not look at it simply as an inanimate object. Instead, they treated it as a "carnal beauty", breathing life into it while simultaneously projecting their predatory behaviours on sculpted marble.[105] Giovanni Bencivenni gia Pelli, a caretaker at the Uffizi, corroborated these claims. He goes on to elaborate that Pope Innocent XI permitted the statue to be removed and relocated due to the inappropriate behaviours of the

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[104] Stijn Bussels, "Da' Più Scorretti Abusata. The Venus De' Medici and Its History of Sexual Responses," in *The Secret Lives of Artworks, Exploring the Boundaries between Art and Life*, ed. Caroline Van Eck, Elsje Van Kessel and Joris Van Gastel (Leiden: Leiden University Press: 2014), 42.
[105] Bussels, "Da' Più Scorretti Abusata," 42.

viewers. Could it be that De Rossi's panel risked a similar reaction from male viewers? Perhaps the graphic nature of her panel would stir sinful and lustful emotions of viewers, instead of reminding them of the divine nature of abstinence and piety.

While nude sculptures and paintings were not unheard of in ecclesiastic settings during the Renaissance, the major factor at play might have been the timing of this commission. As discussed in the sections dedicated to history of the Basilica, della Quercia's own panels had nude women and men, but in a way that differed from De Rossi's. Della Quercia's nude panels were created at a different time, where the morality of nudity in religious art was not as scrutinized, and possibly the nudity of his sculptures did not come under scrutiny. They were also sculpted by a man and not a woman. Della Quercia's pieces were sculpted in the fifteenth century, before major changes regarding religious imagery and the norms for art in ecclesiastic settings were challenged. To better understand the norms of religious iconography before the council of Trent, meaning while De Rossi was actively working, we need to better understand how religious icons and art were viewed in the sixteenth century to see if she was truly taking artistic liberties or simply following the norms and canons used by all artists at that time.

3.4 – Artists and their Inventiveness with Religious Narratives and Iconography

With a better overall understanding of the origins of this subject as well as other depictions within a similar time frame, we can examine how much liberty artists typically had with commissions for religious art, to see if De Rossi might have taken an unusual amount of liberty. Charles Hope, a prominent art historian who has researched religious narratives in art during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, helps illuminate the process of commissioning a religious work of art at the time. Hope clearly explains the categories of religious images used in

churches and how they conventionally follow a sequence or narrative.[106] He states that images during this time were divided into two categories, *imagini* and *storie,* referring to images and stories respectively.[107] Images were portraits of individuals used for veneration, such as a Saint, similar in concept to a portrait. These types of pieces were found in both private homes and in churches and used in prayer. Stories were images depicting a narrative and which could entail a collection of images, following a sequence. In the case of the Basilica of San Petronio, the sequence was that of the story of Joseph from the Old Testament, which were arranged in a way that would allow the viewer to "read" it from top to bottom.[108] This further solidifies the intended placement of De Rossi's panel on the portal as it would be placed close to the half-way mark, which aligns with the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife in the Old Testament. Hope also states quite adamantly that, while patrons selected the subject matter, there is no evidence that they defined how it would be portrayed.[109] Considering this, it is not impossible that De Rossi sculpted the story of Potiphar's wife in such a way that would have been controversial and unexpected for the patrons.

In *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, Michael Baxandall dissects, to the best of his ability, contracts between private patrons and artists. While he is able, thanks to a few remaining letters, to elaborate on the level of control patrons had over painters, he notes that "instructions about the subject of a picture do not often go into great detail" but that artists would

[106] Hope, "Religious Narrative," 808.
[107] Hope, "Religious Narrative," 804.
[108] Hope, "Religious Narrative," 805.
[109] Hope, "Religious Narrative," 809.

usually present a preliminary design or sketch for approval.[110] He later goes on to state that painters usually had a more personal, or at least close, relationship with their patrons, who tended to be given updates about the progress of the commission, whereas sculptors "often worked for large communal enterprises […] where lay control was less personal and probably very much less complete".[111] This may signal that painters and sculptors could sometimes work with different degrees of oversight. In Bram Kempers' book *Painting, Power, and Patronage* the same conclusion is consistent, with patrons having specific details on what to depict, but no mention on specifications on how it should be depicted.[112] The presentation of the story was considered artistic invention, wholly dependent on the artist.[113] This is further supported by the lack of proof of payment for this design of De Rossi's *quadro* in contrast to the receipts found for her other inclusions on the Basilica during the renovations. As previously mentioned, Hope explains that using the features or likeness of real people in religious stories was condemned, which may have led to the exclusion of the piece, assuming that the stories Vasari wrote about in De Rossi's biography were circulated before the biography was published, which may be the case considering the very public and detailed criminal history of our artist.[114] Considering the muddled history of De Rossi, Vasari's treatment of her in his biography and mischaracterization of her character, the complicated history of the Basilica, and artistic norms surrounding this

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[110] Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Vancouver, B.C: Langara College, 2011) 8.
[111] Baxandall, *Painting and Experience*, 5.
[112] Bram Kempers, *Painting, Power and Patronage: The Rise of the Professional Artist in the Italian Renaissance* (London: Allen Lane the Penguin Press, 1992) 5.
[113] Hope, "Religious Narrative," 809.
[114] Hope, "Religious Narrative", 810.

iconography, making any concrete statements is difficult but not impossible. The sum of the evidence suggests that De Rossi might have been instrumental in her own exclusion from the portal. It is possible that she ignored norms surrounding religious art by projecting her own emotions, in a way that was recognizable to contemporary viewers, into a sacred story, which would have been considered inappropriate, however, as shown in section 1, male writers did sometimes slander women who did not obey gender norms. It is also possible that she ignored previous depictions of the subject that were made acceptable for religious settings, like that of Sanzio. Could it have been that she simply intended to follow the precedent set by della Quercia and his use of nudity? Could she have been trying to maintain continuity of the Basilica and follow the style of its original designer, but instead of succeeding fell victim to the double standard? Della Quercia was able to include nude sculpted women, so why couldn't De Rossi? Finally, the fact that it appears that she designed the piece herself suggests that the erotic nature of the *quadro* was her own genius, her own design, and intentional. The question of why remains unanswered. Was Vasari accurately recording history when he claimed she projected herself into the piece, drawing from her own experienced as a scorned lover? Or rather was De Rossi making a statement about women, how they were perceived, and how they were treated by men within Italy and the Church as an institution? To better understand the role of women during this time, further research into gender studies or other sources that discuss sixteenth-century Italian societal norms would be necessary.

Conclusion

Focusing on only concrete evidence, we can see the many layers that contributed to this problematic rendition of the Story of Joseph completed by De Rossi for San Petronio. Considering her personal history and comparing it to Vasari's portrayal in his *Vite* sheds light on how contradictory Vasari's biography of her was, but also allows us to hypothesize how contradictory her very existence was. A woman sculptor actively participating in the project to prepare the Basilica San Petronio of Bologna for the coronation of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, the last coronation presided over by a Pope, was no small feat. Looking through her history for clarification, we find ourselves still wondering why was she commissioned as part of the project? Certain women in Bologna were respected, but part of that inclusion in artistic society relied on the adherence to set gender roles, to which De Rossi did not adhere. Why was she assigned this subject in the sequences of Joseph's life? We have seen that this sequence was used primarily for secular private settings and not religious spaces. Even more unexpected would be the inclusion of this narrative in a religious space, sculpted by a woman, depicting a nude female figure. Finally, why did De Rossi design this piece with such erotic elements, which seemingly break from traditional iconography of religious works? While our answers are not concrete, after reading through all the evidence available, I believe certain deductions can confidently be made. We can confirm to a certain extent that De Rossi designed her own *quadro* due to the lack of proof of payment to another artist for the design, while invoices exist for her other sculptures. We can see that she was to some extent involved in conflicts, as suggested by Vasari, and corroborated by the judicial archives, but we have no way of knowing how much of those conflicts were actually of her own doing or if, for instance, they were false allegations.

Furthermore, the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, a story that also villainizes a woman and was in itself not usually included in Old Testament art for public religious settings was assigned to her.[115] Finally, her depiction of the story contained nudity that had some erotic elements, perhaps more appropriate for a secular setting. The piece was nevertheless so beautiful that, according to Vasari, Pope Clement VII sought out the artist due to her reputable talent. This is the same Pope who a year prior had requested that Raimondi be arrested for his graphic works, suddenly hoping to meet the female artist who had made a piece which, while not as graphic, was still unconventional. Although the *quadro* was ultimately not included in its intended place on the left-hand portal, it was nonetheless hung indoors, away from the intended viewers.

Could we then suggest that De Rossi's gender did play some role in her commission? While her talent is beyond reproach, her gender might have made her an easy target for criticism, and ultimately to be ostracized and slandered by her contemporaries like Aspertini and Vasari. Whether she was included in the project because of a "contest", or by the petitions of either her husband or lover, her participation was an anomaly of which the explanation has yet to be found.[116] Through further analysis into how her history was re-written by Vasari and comparisons to other histories of women manipulated posthumously for patriarchal reasons, we can imagine to what extent the information we do have is tainted or fabricated. By comparing her sculptures to other artworks, we can see that her sculpture might have been out of place.

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[115] While art depicting Joseph and his life is often found in religious settings, this one scene may often be excluded due to the nudity and sexuality of the subject.

[116] Vasari and Ragg are not the only ones who mention a contest, as art historian Therese Schwartz also mentions it in her article "Caterina Vigri and Properzia De Rossi" however this still does not lend credibility to the claim as both Schwatrz and Ragg cite Vasari as the source of that information, however Vasari himself does not provide any type of information that would allow us to corroborate it.

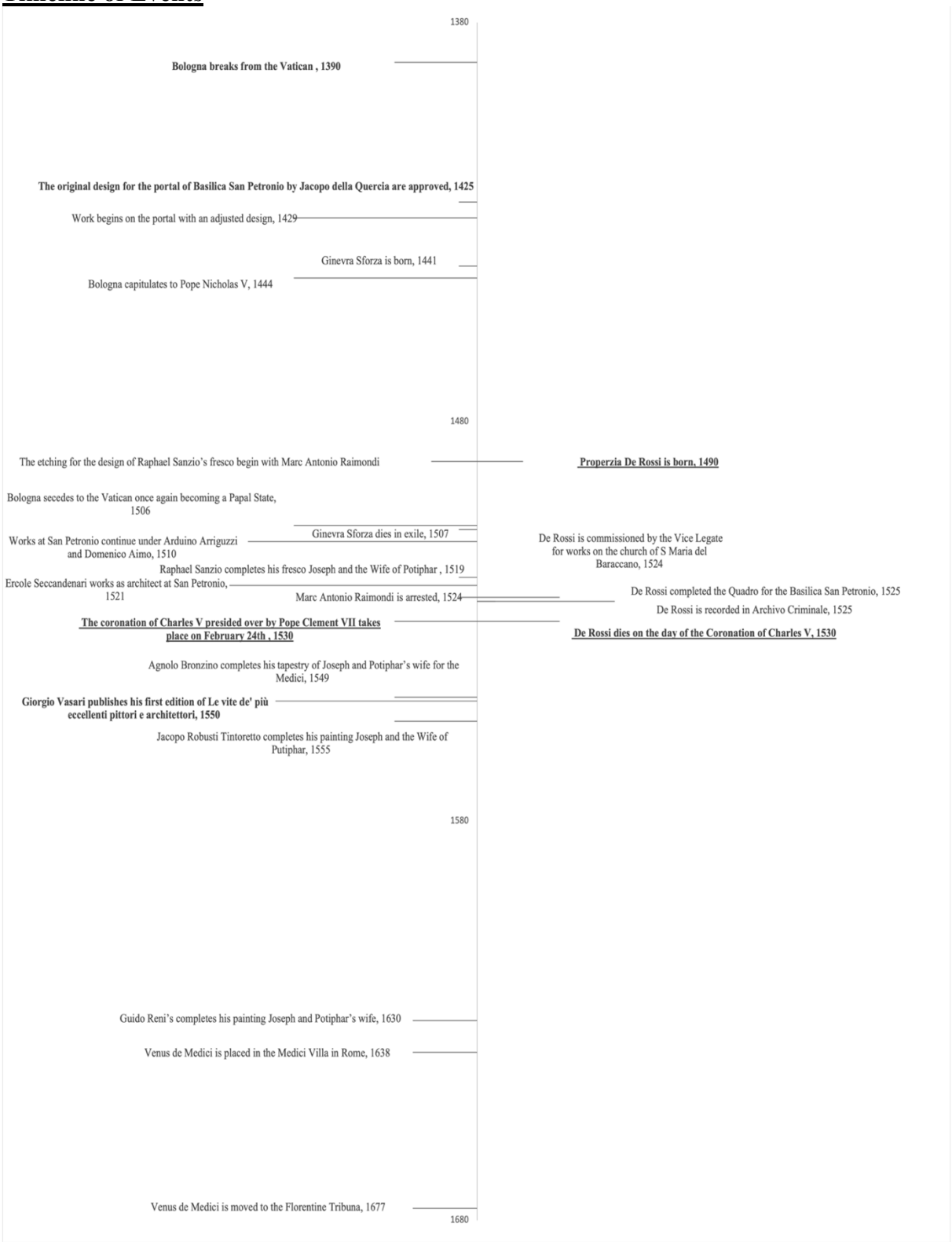
Including the visual representations of Joseph's encounter with Potiphar's wife, a story which vilifies a woman and is usually omitted in sequences depicting Joseph's life, is in itself questionable.

I believe that ultimately her gender played a large role in her artistic career, especially regarding the project of San Petronio. Having received this commission and then choosing to design and execute it as she did, De Rossi responded in turn to the patriarchal society within which she lived and worked. It is also tempting to consider whether De Rossi was assigned this topic because of her gender. When we consider the lack of representations of the story of Potiphar's wife found in religious settings, combined with the knowledge that at the time it was widely believed that De Rossi had had extra-marital affairs, it is tempting to contemplate whether the subject may have been assigned to her as a lesson in chastity.[117] While I have yet to find enough evidence to suggest that her gender affected the choice of subject matter, the circumstantial evidence surrounding the commission induces me to consider whether the Fabbrica had a specific intention when they assigned her the subject. Regardless of how or why she received the commission, her approach to the subject matter, considering she was a woman sculpting a nude, may have been controversial. Finally, I find that the exclusion of the piece is most likely due to the graphic nature of the depiction; even if the sculpture adhered to the style of della Quercia's original pieces, it might not have fit the standard at the time of its creation, leading to its exclusion. Whether her negative reputation affected the exclusion, or her gender, is unknown to us and I have doubts it will ever truly be clear. What we can deduce is that De

[117] I speak here of Vasari's comments surrounding Antonio Galeazzo Malvasia, which I believe would have been publicly known gossip for it to have been included in her *Vite.*

Rossi's talent was respected in some way, but not enough to absolve her of her human sins and faults, which instead were twisted to create a negative narrative which followed her after death. As such *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*, the story of vilification of an unnamed woman, was forever immortalized in infamy by a woman during arguably the most important moment in Bologna during the sixteenth century.

Timeline of Events



Figures

Fig. 1

Properzia De Rossi. *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*. 1520. Marble Relief. Basilica San Petronio, Bologna. https://www.wga.hu/html_m/r/rossi_p/joseph.html

Fig. 2

Properzia De Rossi. *Grassi Family Coat of Arms*. Silver filigree and carved peach and plum stones. 1510-1530. Bologna. Museo Civico Medievale.

https://www.wga.hu/html_m/r/rossi_p/peach.html

Fig. 3

Basilica di San Petronio. Bologna, Italy. 1390. https://www.basilicadisanpetronio.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Basilica-di-San-Petronio-1.png

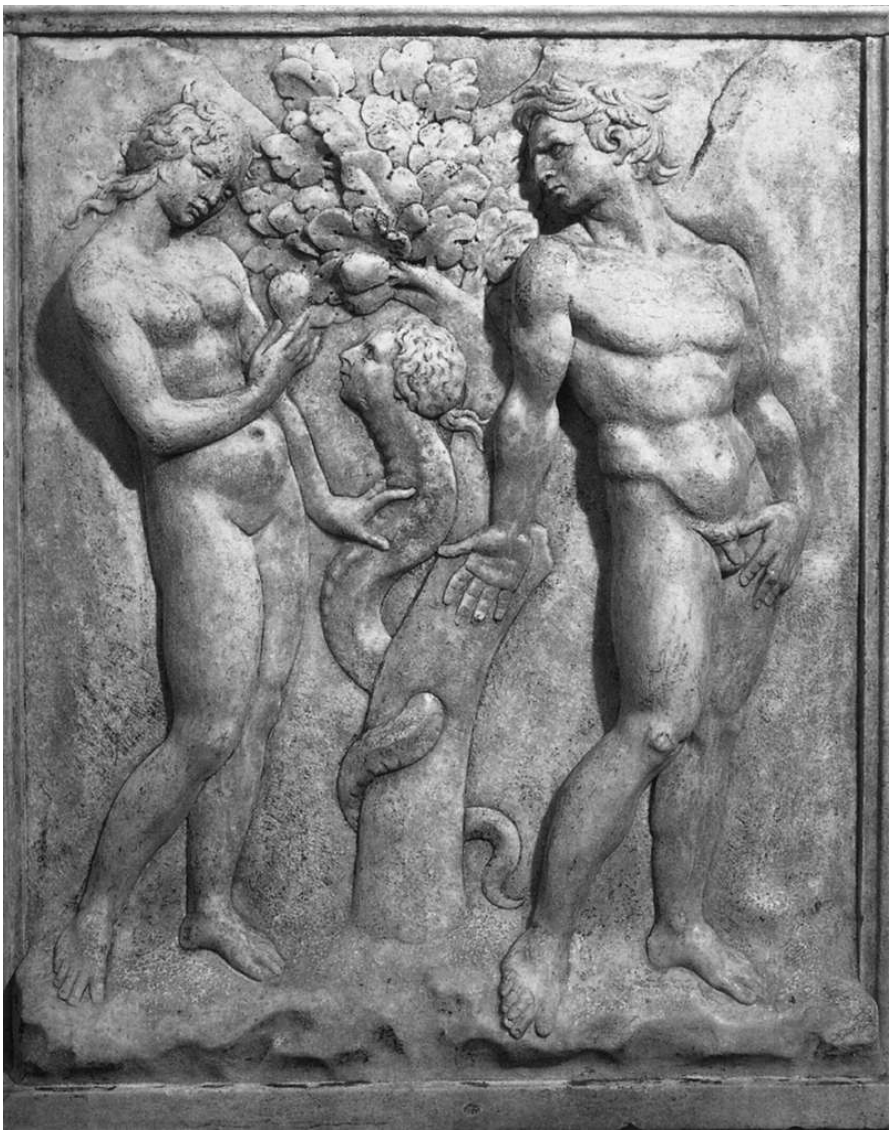


Fig. 4

Jacopo della Quercia. *Original Sin*. Relief in stone. 1425-1428. Bologna, Porta Magna of Basilica San Petronio. https://www.wga.hu/art/q/quercia/jacopo/5petroni/2left_relief3a.jpg

Fig. 5

Biagio D'Antonio. *The Story of Joseph.* Tempera and gold leaf on panel. 1485, Italy. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New Yor**k.**
https://collectionapi.**metmuseum**.org/api/collection/v1/iiif/435666/805539/main-image

Fig. 6

Raphael Sanzio. *Joseph and Potiphar's wife*. Fresco. 1519. Palace of the Pope, Vatican.

https://images.app.goo.gl/F5KohhWnjzDDgHaj6

Fig. 7

Marcantonio Raimondi. *Joseph and the Wife of Potiphar*, From a design by Raphael. Print on paper. 1490-1534. Victoria and Albert Museum.

https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1152928/joseph-and-the-wife-of-print-raphael

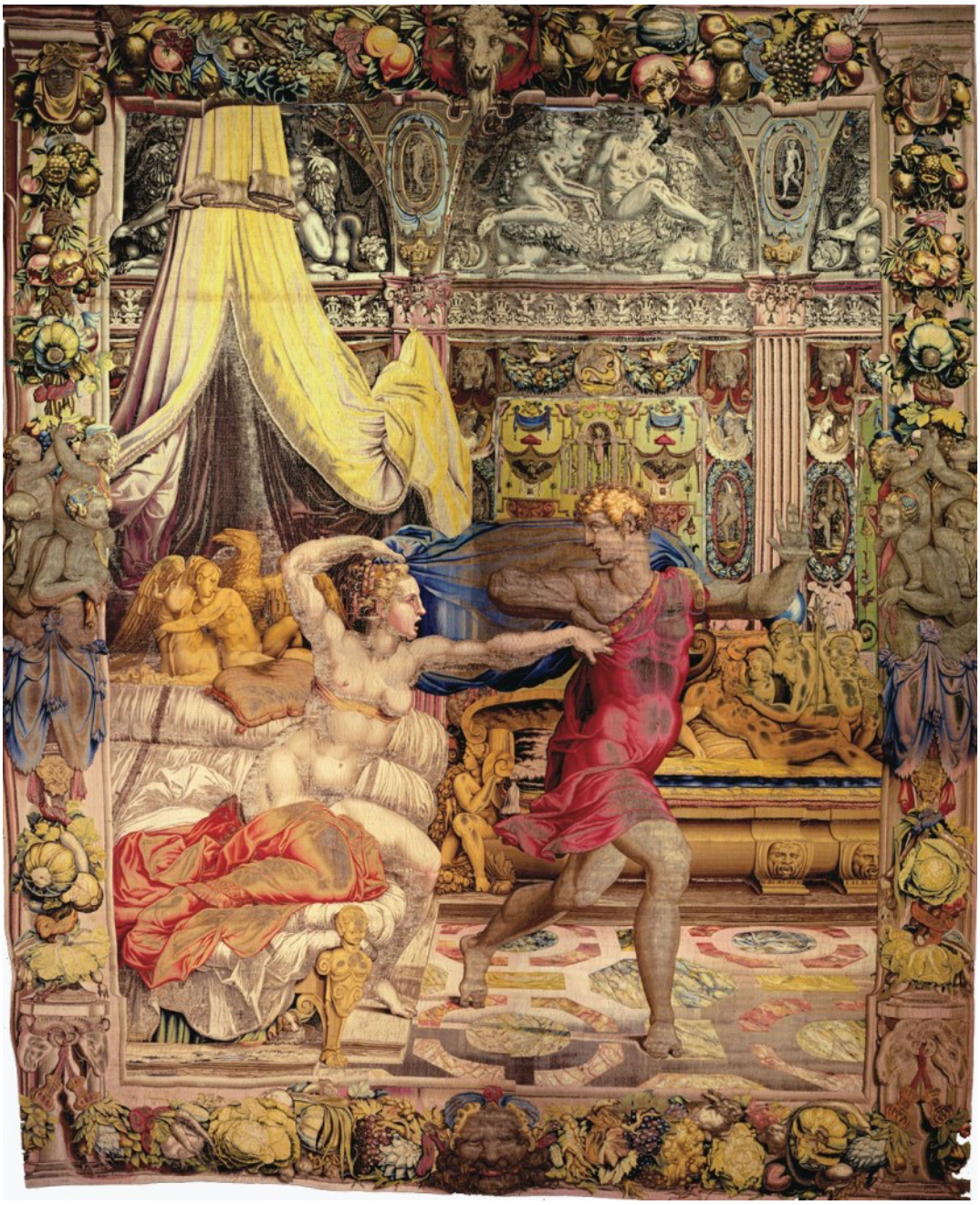


Fig. 8

Agnolo Bronzino. *Joseph Fleeing from the Wife of Potiphar*. Tapestry. 1549. Florence, Palazzo Vecchio. https://insidethevatican.com/magazine/culture/twenty-tapestries-tell-the-biblical-story-of-joseph/

Fig. 9

Jacopo Robusti Tintoretto. *Joseph and the Wife of Putiphar.* Oil on canvas. 1555. Italy. Museo Del Prado. https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/joseph-and-the-wife-of-putiphar/016a0646-726d-4f27-9d80-0d177895b49b

Fig. 10

Orazio Gentileschi. *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife.* Oil on canvas. 1630-1632. London, The National Gallery. https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/orazio-gentileschi-joseph-and-potiphar-s-wife

Fig. 11

Guido Reni, *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife,* oil on canvas. 1630. Bologna. J. Paul Getty Museum.

https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103RJZ#full-artwork-details

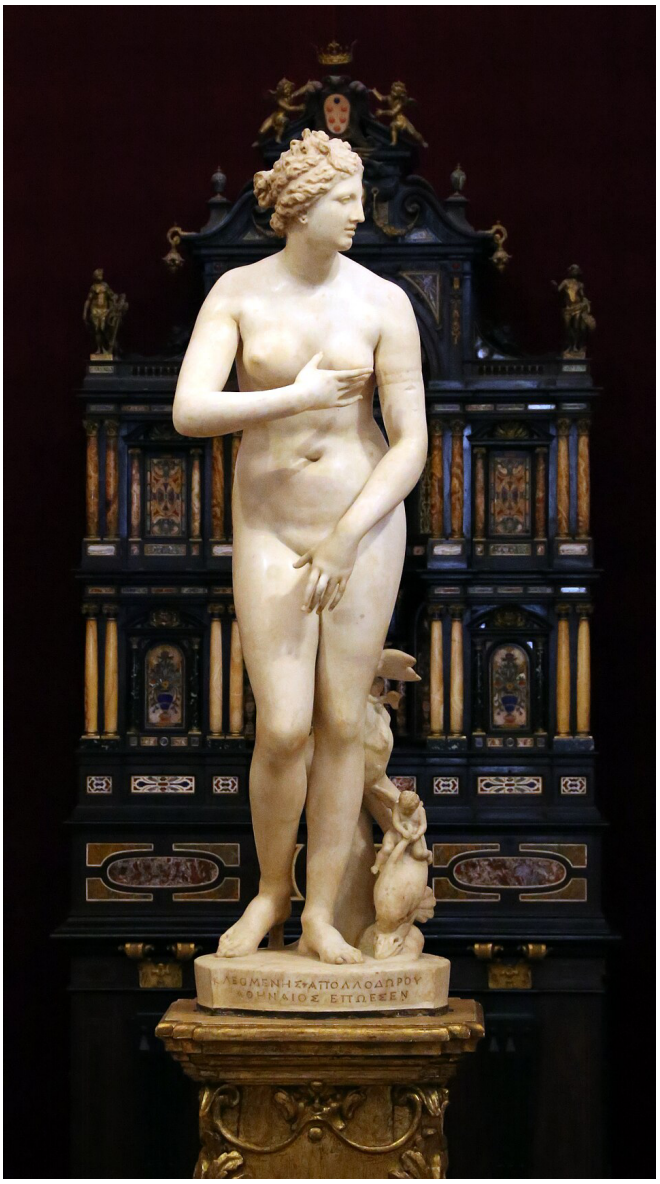


Fig. 12

Roman marble copy after the Aphrodite of Knidos attributed to Praxiteles. 1st Cen. Florence, Uffizi Gallery.

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/82/Cleomene_di_Apollodoro%2C_venere_medici%2C_I_secolo_ac_ca.jpg

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