Redefining the *Pietà* in Sculpture

A New Perspective of One of the Most Significant Sculptures of the Renaissance

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Abstract

This thesis will serve as a contribution to the discussion of Michelangelo Buonarroti's Vatican *Pietà* sculpture of 1499. While the Vatican *Pietà* is one of the most renowned sculptures of the Italian Renaissance, little has been contributed in terms of discussing its patron, Jean Bilhères, in detail. Nor has Jean's unique relationship with the sculptor that created such a striking work of art, intended for his tomb in the French Saint Petronilla Chapel in the Old Saint Peters in Rome, been fully explained. With its classical nature and monumental, youthful, Virgin Mary, the Vatican *Pietà* does not resemble the typical forms of Northern European Late Gothic *Pietà/Vesperbild* sculptures. This raises the question of what circumstances lead to the creation of such a work, and why is it so different? This thesis will argue that Jean Bilhères' vision as a patron, with his political and historically French background, combined with Michelangelo's views of classicism and Florentine culture and art forms to create a new version of a *Pietà* that redefined the way this sculptural type is viewed and interpreted in art.

Dedication

I would like to thank my mentor, Dr. Dobrynin, and advisor, Dr. Klein, who have patiently stood by my side through this long and complicated process. I also would like to thank the archives of Casa Buonarroti, the Louvre, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art for the privilege of curatorial access to research this thesis.

To my Mother…

I have been researching this topic for well over three years now and have been doing so to honor my mother whose favorite sculpture is Michelangelo's Pietà. I hope in my writing I was able to honor Jean Bilhères as well, who deserves to be remembered for his significant life and legacy left behind by the most beautiful sculpture in the world.

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INTRODUCTION: A FRESH PERSPECTIVE AND THE NEED FOR A TOMB

In 1498, Jean Bilhères de Lagraulas (approx.1430-1499), a French Cardinal in Rome commissioned a sculpture of a *Pietà* from Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564), a twenty-three-year-old Florentine artist who was attempting to establish his reputation. Miles Unger mentions in his book, *Michelangelo: A Life in Six Masterpieces*, that "the *Pietà*, while not entirely unknown, was not yet a popular theme in Italian Art" in terms of sculpture.[1] Unger says that "for Michelangelo, the *Pietà* was a rarity in his native land, and the choice of subject no doubt reflected the tastes and traditions of the man who hired him."[2] However, exactly how the 'tastes and traditions' of the patron melded with the artistic vision of the young sculptor, and how what they created together has changed the way we understand the *Pietà* iconography, has never been fully explained within the literature on the work.

It is my assertion that it was the vision of Jean Bilhères to choose the popular Northern European iconography of the *Pietà* for his tomb as a signifier of his French national and religious identity that, along with the classicizing tendencies within Michelangelo's art and his Florentine religious outlook, combined in order to create a brand new interpretation of the *Pietà* within Italy that completed redefined the iconography..

Jean Bilhères, who would eventually become a Cardinal in Rome under Pope Innocent VIII, was quite a significant political, social, and religious figure in France. His notable work included being an abbot of Saint Denis and he aided in peace negotiations between France and its surrounding countries. When Jean moved to Rome in the latter part of his life, he decided to be

[1] Miles Unger, *Michelangelo: A Life in Six Masterpieces*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2015, 57.
[2] Ibid., 57.

buried within the Saint Petronilla Chapel- a chapel within the Old Saint Peter's Basilica, specifically reserved for use by the French clergy.[3] The Cardinal decided to commission a sculpture of a *Pietà* to adorn his burial place. The Cardinal's relationship with banker Jacopo Galli, one of Michelangelo's earliest significant patrons, allowed for the recommendation of the young artist for this tomb commission.[4] With the completion of the Vatican *Pietà* in 1499, Michelangelo gained significant popularity, and in turn introduced this iconography to monumental Italian sculpture. Unfortunately, the Cardinal died before the sculpture's completion, and he never got to see what would become of his commission.[5]

The iconography that was to become known as the *Pietà* originated in the German Rhineland around the late 14th century, where it was called the *Vesperbild*. Complex interrelations would eventually lead to the spread of this sculptural type into France around a century later.[6] By the end of the fifteenth century, the French *Pietà* sculptures appeared in churches, private home altars, hospitals, and other locations depending on the patron. Thus, the iconography of the *Pietà* gained significance to the French people and began to represent French religious identity.[7] Jean Bilhères would have encountered quite a few examples of this type of iconography while working in France as both an abbot, as well as a representative of the French Kings Louis VI and Charles VIII.

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[3] Charles Samaran, *Jean de Bilhères-Lagraulas, Cardinal de Saint-Denis: Un Diplomate Français Sous Louis XI et Charles VIII.* Paris: H. Champion, 1921, 78.
[4] Unger, *Life*, 55.
[5] Samaran, *Bilhères-Lagraulas,* 67.
[6] William H. Forsyth, *The Pietà in French Late Gothic Sculpture: Regional Variations*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995, 19-23.
[7] Emily A. Fenichel, "Michelangelo's Pietà as Tomb Monument: Patronage, Liturgy, and Mourning." *Renaissance Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (2017): 878.

Pietàs were originally intended to provide their viewer with an insight into the human suffering of Jesus Christ and his mother, the Virgin Mary. The German *Vesperbild* prototype of the iconography portrayed the figures of Mary and Jesus as emaciated and would often display polychromed blood on their bodies as a sign of their suffering. French artists seemed to change this iconography as it spread throughout their country, becoming known as a *Pietà,* and they began to depict Christ with less emaciation and graphic wounds. Mary was depicted as a larger, more monumental figure, with regal drapery.[8]

At the time of his tomb commission in 1498, Bilhères would have been aware of the importance of *Pietà* sculptures within the churches and tombs of French patrons in his home country and therefore, when it was time to commission his very own tomb sculpture, this familiarity with the iconography could explain why the *Pietà* was chosen.[9] It also makes sense that the Cardinal, familiar with the specifically French type of *Pietà*, with its image of a larger, Queen-like Virgin and softer image of Christ, would have pointed out these prototypes to Michelangelo, not only as an aesthetic preference but also as a way to encompass his significant allegiance to his homeland.[10]

The *Pietà* that Michelangelo created for his patron, however, seems to depart from both German *Vesperbild* and French *Pietà* examples. In Michelangelo's sculpture, Christ, in a classicized form, has no signs of emaciation, and is almost muscular and heroic in nature, yet he fits comfortably in his mother's lap. In terms of the treatment of the Virgin Mary, the sculptor also departed from Northern European examples. The Virgin that Michelangelo created for this patron

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[8] Forsyth, *Pietà in French Late Gothic*, 19-23.
[9] Antonio Paolucci, *Michelangelo: Le Pietà*. Italiano: Skira, 1997, 15.
[10] Rosemary Muir Wright, *Sacred Distance: Representing the Virgin*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006, 82.

appears more monumental, youthful, and beautiful than previous examples.[11] This treatment of the *Pietà* iconography can be attributed to the influence on Michelangelo of Florentine aesthetics and theology at the turn of the 16th century.

This thesis seeks to broaden the art historical narrative of Michelangelo's *Pietà*; first by analyzing the history and evolution of the *Pietà* genre as it spread throughout Europe. It will explore the life of Michelangelo's patron, Jean Bilhères de Lagraulas, and his connection to this iconography in the context of his political and religious duties in France, and what *Pietà* examples he would have been familiar with. Lastly, the study will look at Michelangelo's commission itself and examine Michelangelo's artistic vision, steeped within Florentine artistic tradition, as it completely changes the stylistic and psychological meaning of this statue type into the 16th century and onward.

Michelangelo's *Pietà* is generally viewed through an artistic perspective, in terms of describing its differences from other forms of this iconography. I argue that there is a much broader and complex story to be told of the artwork, as there is a much deeper and psychological meaning to the work than meets the eye. The *Pietà* iconography transformed entirely, as it evolved from a ritualistic and interactive idea to a deeper representation of culture and art.

[11] Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011, 128.

SECTION I: HISTORY OF THE *PIETÀ* AND ITS EVOLUTION INTO FRANCE

Germany

To understand Jean Bilhères' choice of a *Pietà* sculpture for his tomb, it is imperative to first discuss the iconography itself, its subsequent move into France, and its evolution there. The *Pietà* originated in the German Rhineland at the end of the thirteenth century, where it was known as a *Vesperbild*. This iconography was part of a group of new devotional images, referred to as *Andachtsbilder* (a religious image intended for meditation and contemplation) in German, that were formed across Europe as a response to changes brought about by social upheaval due to events such as Black Death and the Hundred Years War.[12] It seemed that the people of Europe found that they could no longer be satisfied with only artistic representations of the Passion of Christ which focused on visual narratives of the biblical passage, and instead desired to have images through which they could connect to the divine through a more intimate representation of Christ.[13]

Andachtsbilder images demonstrate a religious figure that has been extracted from their biblical context in order to isolate the figure in their own form of emotional and powerful imagery. Christ is usually viewed as a lone figure within an *Andactsbild* image or accompanied by the Virgin Mary. These images ranged from iconography such as the *Man of Sorrows*, *Pensive Christ*, the *Veil of Veronica,* and the *Vesperbild* (*Pietà*).

The purpose of the *Andactsbild* was to demonstrate and isolate these holy figures apart from typical Christian narrative, allowing the viewer to step into a private moment in time with

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[12] Forsyth, *Pietà in French Late Gothic,* 17.
[13] William D. Wixom, "Medieval Sculpture: At the Cloisters." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 46, no. 3 (1988): 35.

Christ and contemplate his human suffering. In each of these images, Christ is generally depicted in an emaciated way, often with a crown of thorns drawing blood from His head. Christ is depicted with a distraught and exhausted look upon His face as He faces the human-like suffering of the Passion's sacrifice. If the Virgin Mary is present in the image, she is typically viewed in distress as her son is either suffering immense pain or is deceased. There is a strong emphasis within these images of the suffering and intense grief of Christ and those closest to him, especially the Virgin Mary as his mother.

Andachtsbilder appeared as prints, paintings, and sculpture. They appeared in private homes of the middle class of Northern German regions, but more monumental versions of *Andachtsbilder* also began to appear in larger scale churches and places of worship as the century progressed.[14]

The most prominent type of *Andachtsbilder* were referred to as *Vesperbilder* coming from the Latin word "Vesper," meaning a type of evening prayer, and the German word "bild," for 'picture.' *Vesperbilder* were typically sculptures in various mediums, ranging from small figures to large, monumental images. They were representations of the Virgin Mary cradling her son in her arms after Christ's crucifixion and deposition from the cross. Like other *Andachtsbilder*, the scene portrayed by the *Vesperbild* iconography between a mother and son is not taken from any particular biblical passage. It is significant to note that though one may assume that this scene was described in scripture, there is no proven biblical reference to an event after the Crucifixion in which Mary mourns her dead son in her arms.[15]

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[14] Ziegler says that "the practices of devotion and its assisting imagery were totally transformed by the desire of the clergy and laity to experience in a multitude of formats the humanity of Christ. Christ as a man, son, infant, mortal sufferers-these were characteristics of the divinity the late medieval believer hungered to know, to feel, and to see." Joanna E. Ziegler, "Michelangelo and the Medieval Pietà: The Sculpture of Devotion or the Art of Sculpture?" *Gesta* 34, no. 1 (1995): 29.

[15] Ibid., 29.

As their name implies, *Vesperbild* sculptures were used during the recitation of Vespers, the evening prayers recited as part of the larger prayer series called the Hours of the Virgin, and were recited during the time of day in which Christ was removed from the cross .[16] Vespers was a time of day for medieval worshippers to reflect on their own sufferings and ask for forgiveness for their sins, while also seeking comfort within the aid of the Virgin Mary. By utilizing images such as the *Vesperbild*, worshippers were face to face with a physical form of Christ and the Virgin and could utilize these images to contemplate their own pain and suffering to connect to the divine.

Vesperbilder were generally altarpieces in a church or a private home. Early examples of German *Vesperbilder* ranged in sizes, both large and small, depending on the prominence of the location. Within a church, they were generally not intended for a high altar, but rather a lower altar to allow for a more intimate setting for physical worship with the object. These sculptures could have appeared larger, if they were in a more public setting.[17] Within home altars, *Vesperbild* may have smaller, more private versions of these sculptures for more personal devotion. Regardless of size, their function remained the same, in that the objects were utilized for prayer and contemplation for Northern Europeans, in which they were invited to reflect upon their own suffering by being face to face with an image portraying the suffering of Jesus Christ as his mourning mother cradles him within her arms.[18]

During *Vespers*, the worshippers would have been connecting and interacting with these images, as they reflected on the human suffering of Jesus Christ, as well as the suffering of the

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[16] Wendy A. Stein, *How to Read Medieval Art*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2016, 25.

[17] Wixom, "Medieval Sculpture": 35.

[18] Ziegler mentions that there are texts from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, such as poems dedicated to the Virgin that may have shaped the way the iconography circulated in Europe. These included lyrical poetry from Germany that describe the sorrows of the Virgin, which seem to be in tune with the functionality of *Andachtsbilder* such as the *Vesperbild.* These texts influenced the assumption for medieval Germans that Mary mourned her dead son when he was released from the cross. One of these examples of poetry and lyrical texts is the Stabat Mater- a hymn to the Virgin that demonstrates the anguish of a mother watching the suffering and subsequent death of her adult son. See Ziegler, "Michelangelo and the Medieval Pietà": 28-29.

Virgin Mother.[19] As all *Andachtsbilder* were depicted, *Vesperbilder* were grotesque in nature, in order to actively portray this thought provoking and emotional scene of suffering. It is clear, then, that these sculptural types were not used as aesthetically pleasing art, but rather this idea of ritual, where those in the Middle Ages would instead be using these sculptural types to feel pity and sorrow for the divine in a human way, which could relate to their own sufferings.[20]

For German *Vesperbilder*, the most common characteristics of these sculptures were that they were sculpted from polychromed wood. They tended to demonstrate a heavily emaciated and wounded Jesus Christ, with a crown of thorns adorning His dead body, as blood drips from his detailed wounds and head. Christ is usually arched in an uncomfortable and unnatural position and is not positioned comfortably upon his mother's lap. The Virgin usually appears aged, with a distraught or mournful expression on her face, as she cradles her lifeless son in her arms.

One distinct example of this type of image is the *Röttgen Pietà* (German *Vesperbild*) from 1300-25, located in the Rheinisches Landes museum in Bonn. **(Figure 1)** This image is a clear example of a depiction of Christ and Mary's human suffering within Northern European art. Here, we see a brutally wounded and emaciated Jesus Christ within the lap of his mother. Christ's crown of thorns digs into his scalp, drawing blood down his face. He is demonstrated as a corpse going through the stages of rigor mortis, with his flesh torn away. The Virgin appears older and in shock as she holds her child in her arms. Here demonstrates the sheer brutality of this type of German iconography, which would have been used to connect with the worshipper's own suffering and reflection within devotion.

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[19] Ibid., 36.

[20] Overtime, as these *Vesperbild* images spread throughout Europe, they would eventually reach the repertory of painting as well. This was the most prominent art form of this imagery in Italy, up until Michelangelo's Vatican *Pietà* sculpture- the first large scale image of its kind beyond the Alps. See Ziegler in Ibid., 28.

Another example of this sort of brutality is demonstrated in a *Vesperbild* from the Metropolitan Museum of Art Cloisters from 1375-1400. **(Figures 2 and 3)** In this specific example, Jesus is depicted with large hands and an emaciated body, with wounds that are quite enlarged. Mary is gazing at the body of her deceased son with great sorrow, as she purses her lips. Christ's body is smaller than that of the *Röttgen*, demonstrating a range of styles taking place within Germany. The demonstration of Christ's abnormally small body could potentially be portraying the idea of Mary holding the body of her son, and imagining him as an infant once again, as she cradles him in her arms. [21] This depiction of motherly love and compassion would have been sought after within the art of Northern Europe, as the people were suffering the deaths of their loved ones from the plague.

As the *Vesperbild* image moved beyond Germany, it began to take many forms. To study the evolution of this iconography, the most prominent of these forms is that of this image in France, where the *Vesperbild* became the *Pietà* and began to adopt new regional characteristics, which can demonstrate the examples in which Jean Bilhères would have known when commissioning such a work for his tomb in Rome.

[21]Stein, *Medieval Art*, 25.

Figure 1: *Röttgen Pietà*, c. 1300–25; painted wood; 34 ½ in.; LVR-LandesMuseum Bonn.

Figures 2 and 3: *Pietà* (Vesperbild); 1375–1400; Rhineland, German; Poplar, plaster, paint, gilt; 52 1/4 x 27 3/8 x 14 1/2 in.; Photograph by Avery Richardson, courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

France

It was not until the late fourteenth century that the *Vesperbild* spread into France. There, it would undergo a change in name, becoming known as a *Pietà*, meaning "the pity" of the Virgin and Christ. The iconography would also undergo changes in form and interpretation.

William Forsyth, a former curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in his book, *The Pietà in French Late Gothic Sculpture: Regional Variations* gives us a clue as to how the *Vesperbild* might have found its way into the imaginations, and onto the altars, of the French people. He says that "a great political and cultural rapprochement took place between France and Germany in 1378, when the Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV (1316-1378), with his son, the King

of Bohemia, went to Paris on a state visit to his nephew and ally, King Charles V of France (1338-1380). The devotional idea of the *Pietà*, which must have been in the air, could well have been transmitted by such contracts."[22] Thus, the *Vesperbild* which seems to have been, in Germany, mostly the reserve of private devotion in homes and secondary church altars during Vespers became, in France, the *Pietà* (from the Latin word 'Pity') and associated with the patronage of the country's nobility. Therefore, the image became a larger iconography, which extended beyond that of smaller devotional places.

In the fourteenth and into the fifteenth centuries in France, the patronage of *Pietàs* seems to have been closely tied to royal patronage. This trend seems to have been started by one particular French noble, Philip the Bold (1342-1404), Brother of the King of France and the Duke of the French territory of Burgundy, who commissioned the very first recorded *Pietà* (now lost) sculpture in France. This sculpture was created 1388 by the French sculptor Perrin Denys (fl.1388), and was intended for the Duke's residence in Paris, the Hôtel d'Artois. In 1390, this sculpture was transported from Paris to the Duke of Burgundy's newly founded Carthusian monastery, the Chartreuse de la Sainte-Trinité de Champmol, on the outskirts of Dijon. Although it is unknown exactly where the sculpture was placed within the monastery, it seems to have been utilized originally for private devotion. The sculpture's role expanded, however, into an image in which the Duke and his family could encourage those visiting the monastery to offer prayers for the salvation of the royal family. [23]

There is record of another *Pietà* commissioned within the French territory of Burgundy around 1390, also speculated to be within the circle of Philip the Bold. This *Pietà* survives, now in the Liebieghaus at Frankfurt am Main, giving us a clue as to what these commissions looked

[22] Forsyth, *The Pietà in French Late Gothic*, 19.
[23] Ibid., 19.

like within the circle of the Duke. The sculpture's style suggests the style of the Dutch artist Claus Sluter (c.1340-1405/6), who was the most prominent artist of Philip the Bold's ducal workshop at the time in the Burgundian territories. **(Figure 4)** The assumption can be made that Claus Sluter may have sculpted this work, or it was modeled on his work, based on the evidence of how it was carved.

Sluter was known for his monumental dynamism in composition, which would become a characteristic of French *Pietàs* in general, and the sculpture at Frankfurt is definitely no exception.[24] The suggestion of this work being attributed to Sluter further supports the evidence that these sculptures were being commissioned by royal nobility and became a symbol of something more political. This *Pietà* is the sculpture which serves as an early model for what French *Pietàs* would become as it is less brutalized from the German *Vesperbild* prototypes.[25] In this example, the *Pietà* depicts a sort of tameness of the iconography at hand, with a lack of articulation in the emaciation of Christ's torso, and there is a lack of polychromed wounds. The sculpture, it is also important to note, is made from limestone, whereas these German prototypes were carved from wood. This suggests not only a change in monumentalism and brutalization of the figures, but also a change in material. The heavy drapery of the Virgin provides a sort of monumentalism for the work, and Christ's body is supported on his mother's lap. She appears larger than her son in the work, making the Virgin appear to be the monumental focal point of the sculpture, like how Michelangelo would later sculpt his Vatican *Pietà* in 1499.

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[24] Forsyth discusses the monumental heavy drapery of Burgundian types in his article of "Medieval Statues of the Pieta in the Museum" stating that "what probably gave most French *pietàs* their sense of monumentality and volume was their advent of the great Claus Sluter, sculptor to the Duke of Burgundy." See Forsyth, *Pietà in French Late Gothic*, 180-81.

[25] During the fourteenth century, the *Pietà* image had not yet reached its full potential within France, as "deteriorating economic conditions during the Hundred Years' War militate against artistic patronage except by people of high rank. It was only with the economic and cultural revival of France in the second half of the fifteenth century that the *pietà* became common in sculpture in the rest of the territories of France." Up until this point, royal patronage was the main form of this iconography circulating in France. See Forsyth in Ibid., 19-23.

In 1433, Isabella of Portugal (1397-1471), the wife of Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy, provided several endowments to monasteries throughout France to encourage the saying of masses to pray for the royal family. Part of these endowments included the gift of an engraved copper plaque containing the image of a *Pietà* within the center. Art historians have noticed that there is "a possible relationship between these plaques and the now lost *Pietà* that had been brought to the monastery in Champmol in 1390 by Philip the Bold, the grandfather of Isabella's husband".[26] One example of these plaques depicts the Virgin and Christ in the center of the plaque, flanked by Isabella, her husband and their three sons. **(Figure 5)** There is a heaviness in the drapery of the Virgin and a monumentality about her figure, as Christ demonstrates little emaciation, like previous German examples. The royal family surrounding the image allows viewers to contemplate and offer prayers for Isabella and her family within the monasteries, such as in Champmol and Basel.[27]

15th century *Pietàs* in France were heavily influenced by the school of Dijon-Slutian tradition by including a heavily draped Virgin with a veil covering her head for morning.[28] Generally, these *Pietàs* were far less grotesque than the typical *Vesperbild* of Germany, and the commonality in the monumentalism of the Virgin seemed to run all throughout French examples, even as the iconography spread beyond just the royal circles. The destruction of many of these sculptures over later centuries creates a barrier to understanding them in depth, but it is clear that they are all based on the continuity of Slutian traditions throughout France, as the examples above have demonstrated.

[26] Ibid., 21.
[27] Ibid., 21.
[28] Ibid., 21-23.

Thus, when Jean Bilhères decided to engage with what undoubtedly was the most important acts of art patronage in his life he clearly would have been aware of the multitude of examples of the *Pietà* in France, considering how widespread they were throughout his homeland. Jean would also have been aware of how important such iconography was to the religious identity of France's most important royal patrons. It would seem from the combination of form, function, and meaning that the *Pietà* would be the perfect subject matter for a patron with both a strong religious and French identity as Jean.

Figure 4: *Pietà*; c. 1450; Limestone with Traces of Polychromy; 122cm; Frankfurt Am Main, Germany in Liebieghaus; William Forsyth Regional Variations pg. 23.

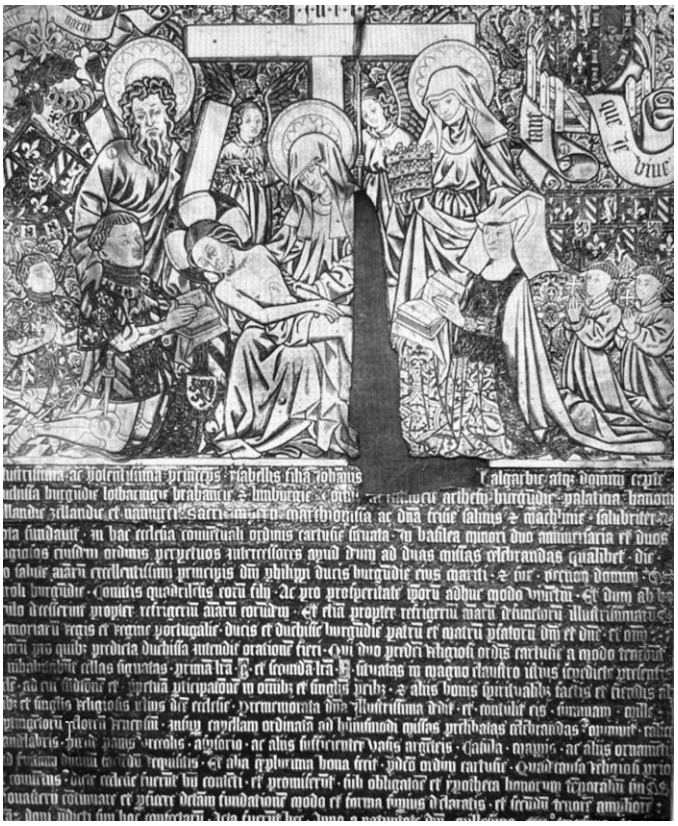

Figure 5: Basel, Switzerland, votive plaque, in Historisches Museum, from nearby Carthusian Monastery of Val-SainteMarguerite, Photo: M. Babey; William Forsyth Regional Variations pg. 22.

SECTION II: JEAN BILHÈRES: THE PATRON

A Biography

The information that we know from Jean Bilhères de Lagraulas' biography paints the man as one whose utmost life work consisted of a careful balance between his religious duties as a man of the cloth and his patriotic duties to the country of France.

Jean Bilhères de Lagraulas (approx.1430-1499) was born to a noble family in Gascony, France. Although he was the eldest son, and therefore heir to his family's estates, Lagraulas decided, at an early age, to dedicate himself to religious life by entering the Order of Saint Benedict. He studied theology at the University of Toulouse and, in 1473, he became Abbot of Saint-Michel de Pessan Abbey. [29]

It was at this time that his service to the French crown began, as he became a royal counselor to King Louis XI of France (1423-1483). It was in this capacity that Jean proved himself to be a capable negotiator for the crown. For example, after the death of the Count Jean V of Armagnac (1420-1473), some of the count's lands hesitated to recognize the authority of King Louis XI. The King sent Bilhères to these lands to convince them to remain loyal to France and, despite the advances of the Aragonese King, the counties returned to the French orbit. [30]

With such a successful diplomatic mission, King Louis XI, with the approval of Pope Sixtus IV (P. 1471-1484) promoted Jean as Gascon Bishop of Lombez in 1473, an honor which he would hold until right before his death. With this newfound status, Jean quickly began to be an intermediary between the circle of the King of France and the Papacy. By the favor of both King and Pope, Jean became one of the most powerful prelates of the French Kingdom.

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[29] Samaran, *Bilhères-Lagraulas*, 12-15.
[30] Salvador Miranda, "The Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church." https://cardinals.fiu.edu/bios1493.htm#Bilheres.

When the preceding Abbot of Saint Denis died in 1475, King Louis XI named Jean as his successor.[31] As the Abbot of Saint-Denis, Jean would have overseen the Saint-Denis Cathedral- a royal chapel where many of the kings of France are buried. This cathedral was both a major religious site within France, but also a site of extensive pilgrimage and trade. This was a significant honor, as Pope Sixtus IV wanted to name another person, Cardinal Guillaume d'Estouteville (c. 1412–1483), as the Abbot of Saint Denis. However, King Louis XI was opposed to this nomination, and the King, along with the support of monks, professors, and pupils from the *Collége de Saint-Denis* Bilhères was unanimously elected to the position.[32]

King Louis XI continued to trust Jean in both religious and political arenas, and in the same year as being elected Abbot of Saint Denis, the King found Jean's diplomatic missions to be so successful, he appointed Jean Bilhères the advisor of the French Parliament. This relationship would continue between Jean and the King as Louis XI utilized Bilhères' talents for a plethora of other diplomatic missions, including negotiations with Spain and Portugal, such as the 1475 treaty of San Juan de la Luz, throughout his time in the role of Abbot of Saint Denis.[33]

Upon the death of Louis XI and the ascension of King Charles VIII (1483-1498) to the French throne, Jean Bilhères' reputation of being a successful political representative ensured his favor with the new King, as Jean found himself elected by the French royal regents as president of the Court *des Aides*.[34] In 1484, Jean became a delegate of the Parisian clergy at the Estates-General of Tours under the discretion of the new King.[35] Jean's greatest service to both religion and state

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[31] Due to his educational status in theology, Jean Bilhères was able to successfully claim the benefit of becoming the Abbot of Saint Denis, based on his proles with the orders of Saint Benedict. Jean's relationship between religion and the state of France was quite prominent, further enforcing his later desire to commission a *Pietà* for his tomb. See Samaran, *Bilhères-Lagraulas,* 15.

[32] Miranda, "Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church."

[33] Samaran, *Bilhères-Lagraulas*, 18-30.

[34] Miranda, "Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church."

[35] At the time, it was not uncommon for religious diplomats in similar roles to Bilhères to lose their appointments after a new King entered the throne. However, for Jean he remained in good standing due to his importance to the

came when Charles VIII appointed and entrusted Jean with the office of the ambassador of the Pope.[36] It was common practice for French diplomatic missions to the papal court to be entrusted to men of the church, because they were seen as more effective, yet Jean's reputation allowed for him to be seen as all the more successful with such negotiations.[37] It was this relationship with Charles VIII that would lead Jean Bilhères on a mission to Rome that would define the entirety of how we perceive him today.[38]

In November of 1491, King Charles VIII called upon Jean Bilhères and twelve other members of the clergy to serve as ambassadors of the royal council to the Pope in Rome. Without these other twelve men being distinctly mentioned apart from Jean, it is easy to infer that due to his extensive diplomatic experience, Jean was most likely the head of the group that would set off to Rome.[39] Their most important mission upon traveling to Rome would be demonstrating to the Pope the rights of Charles VIII over the Duchy of Brittany, and to make it clear that Charles VIII was willing to put himself at the head of a crusade over the infidels. The men were asked to assure the Pope that the King was doing everything he could to make sure he and the King of Naples were

monarchy. See Flaminia Bardati, "National and Private Ambitions in the Patronage of French Cardinals at the Papal Court (Fifteenth to Sixteenth Centuries)." Royal Studies Journal 4, no. 2 (December 16, 2017): 48.

[36] Samaran, *Bilhères-Lagraulas, Cardinal de Saint-Denis: Un Diplomate Français Sous Louis XI et Charles VIII.* Paris: H. Champion, 1921, 44.

[37] Bardati, "Patronage of French Cardinals": 39.

[38] Emily Fenichel gives a great summary of the significance of Jean Bilhères' life in the article, "Michelangelo's Pietà as Tomb Monument: Patronage, Liturgy, and Mourning." Fenichel says, "born in the South of France, near Toulouse, Lagraulas entered the Benedictine order as a young man. He quickly rose to the ranks of clergy, becoming a confidant of the French kings, archbishop of St. Denis, and a diplomat for the French in both Italy and Spain. He traveled extensively on both peninsulas in service of the king of France. In fact, his political and diplomatic career may be more storied than his religious one. This statement encompasses Jean Bilhères' significant early life, which would eventually lead him into his political significance in Rome as a cardinal. See Emily A. Fenichel, "Michelangelo's Pietà as Tomb Monument: Patronage, Liturgy, and Mourning." *Renaissance Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (2017): 862.

[39] The men were also tasked with ensuring those who were not of French nationality could not receive benefits from King Charles VIII. They also sought out the regulation of the provisions of benefits for the order of Saint-Jean-de Jerusalem. Other matters included requesting Anfar Dubois to be promoted within the Holy Church, privileges for the University of Paris, as well as justify claims of Charles VIII over Tournay. See Samaran, *Bilhères-Lagraulas,* 45.

at Peace, an issue that would later lead to the Italian Wars. In the end, the diplomats wanted to establish an effective allegiance between France and Rome.[40]

Jean, again, proved to be an excellent leader, providing a brief speech on behalf of the King of France regarding the delegation's mission, in which he commented on the King's support for the successors of Saint Peter. He praised the Pope's Ambassadors to France, and read letters of recommendation from Charles VIII for the Sacred College of Cardinals.[41] This mission was clearly a success as, upon the death of Pope Innocent VIII (P.1484-1492), Jean Bilhères was appointed governor of Rome by the Sacred College of Cardinals during the "sede vacante" left by the Pope's passing in 1492.[42] This appointment for Jean Bilhères was made possible by Cardinal Raffaele Riario (1461-1521), better known as Cardinal di San Giorgio, who would end up being a significant influence during the commission of Jean's tomb, later on.[43] Jean was often seen on the French cardinal-priest councils, and even appeared on the council for the election of Popes, when the new Pope, Alexander VI (P. 1492-1503) ,was selected.[44]

On September 23rd, 1493, Jean Bilhères reached the pinnacle of his career as he was recommended by King Charles VIII to be promoted to the title of Cardinal by Pope Alexander VI, in which he successfully gained the name of Cardinal San Dionigi.[45] His reputation continued to precede him throughout the Holy City. Johannes Burckard's diary of the Papal Master of Ceremonies records that Jean was often present at the Pope's side during public occasions and at Mass in Saint Peter's.[46]

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[40] Ibid.,46.
[41] Ibid., 47-48.
[42] Bardati, "Patronage of French Cardinals": 48.
[43] Frank Zöllner and Christof Thoenes, *The Complete Works; Michelangelo; Paintings, Sculptures, Architecture*. Taschen, n.d., 2007, 33.
[44] Samaran, *Bilhères-Lagraulas,* 52.
[45] Ibid., 53.
[46] Bardati, "Patronage of French Cardinals": 48.

As a Cardinal, Jean faced even more delicate matters where he was forced to balance his duties to both the church and to France. During the period of the Italian Wars, Jean Bilhères faced a remarkably interesting perspective of things as Cardinal. In 1494 King Charles VIII of France invaded the Kingdom of Naples at the instigation of Ludovico "Il Moro" Sforza (1542–1508), ruler of Milan, who promised the King Milan's support in his endeavors to take control of the territory.[47] While Italy and France were at the brink of war, Jean Bilhères was faced with a very controversial standpoint, as he was not only representing his King, but he was meant to represent the Papal court. Flaminia Bardati mentions that the Cardinal's "position was very delicate, and his behavior could risk being ambiguous. His principal diplomatic actions were aimed at having Charles VIII recognized as King of Naples, and his way of pressuring the Pope was as always, the mirage of the abolition of the Pragmatic Sanction. But at the same time, his close relationship with the Pope represented a way of exerting pressure on the King to maintain a primary role in the French political balance."[48]

Even with all his devotion to the Pope and his own office of Cardinal, Jean did not forget his French national identity and his duty as a representative of the French government. He kept a sharp eye upon the conflicts between France and Italy and would often report back to the King on what was said when tensions were high. King Charles VIII also tasked Bilhères with work with the Sacred College of Cardinals to report favorable news about the King, and to stop any propaganda about the French from spreading within Rome. No matter what, though Jean was

[47] Josef Vincent Lombardo, *Michelangelo the Pietà and Other Masterpieces*. New York: Pocket Books, 1965, 19.
[48] Bardati mentions that Bilhères was "underlining with his patronage the desire to boost the image of France in Rome, though without ever losing sight of the personal benefit that might accrue from the papal favor". See Bardati, "Patronage of French Cardinals": 47-48.

representing the Pope in Rome, he always ensured that his allegiances to the King were known, an idea that carried with him until the end of his life.[49]

As Lagraulas reached the end of his life in the latter half of the 1490s, records of his political and religious activities became increasingly rare. We do not have any records of what ceremonies he attended during this time, or what his interests were.[50] What we do have, however, are the significant records of his tomb commission. These surviving records of his commission for a sculpture for his tomb give us an understanding that he was preparing to honor his own life and career. He commemorated his devotion to both the French crown and the Papacy through artistic patronage of a monumental sculpture to adorn his tomb.

Saint Petronilla Chapel

For Jean Bilhères, the placement of the monumental sculpture he was to erect in his honor was almost as important as the artwork to be commissioned itself. The Cardinal had asked Pope Alexander VI for permission to be buried within the Saint Petronella Chapel in the Old Saint Peter's Basilica. This chapel was a circular rotunda structure built in the fifth century for the purpose of holding the relics, including the remains, of Saint Petronilla, the daughter of Saint Peter.[51] The chapel had become a significant addition to the Old St. Peter's Basilica, which was built in 326-333 AD, and would have been to the left of the entrance of the basilica. **(Figure 6)** The notable Frankish King Pepin (c.714/24-768) is said to have given the chapel the name of Saint

[49] Samaran, *Bilhères-Lagraulas,* 60.
[50] Ibid., 64-72.
[51] The relics were later moved, with the destruction of the chapel, to make room for the new Saint Peters in the seventeenth century. See William E. Wallace, "Michelangelo's Rome Pietà: Altarpiece or Grave Memorial?" in *Verrocchio and Late Quattrocento Italian Sculpture, ed. Steven Bule, Alan Phipps Darr and Fiorella Superbi Gioffredi* (Florence, 1992), 243-44.

Petronilla in the eighth century.[52] Since then, for the French living in Rome, the Chapel of Saint Petronilla served as a national sanctuary, which had been endowed and patronized by the French monarchy.[53] It was often used for burials of French prelates and kings, and was even referred to as the "Chapel of the King of France". [54] Even Charles VIII, who visited this chapel during his travels to Rome, and attended mass there.[55]

For Bilhères, being buried within Saint Petronilla would have been a unique opportunity for commemoration after his death, due to the relics of Saint Petronilla being present within the chapel, and the fact that the chapel held such significance to France.[56] Bardati says that Jean's "obedience to his king and the image of the French monarchy seem to have motivated Lagraulas' choice of burial place." [57] Due to lack of documentation, however, there seems to be no evidence that a Cardinal had been buried within this chapel before Bilhères. So, it seems that there was undeniably a deeper connection between Saint Petronilla Chapel and the Cardinal, in that it served as a place to honor the French monarchy in which he was so deeply intertwined, yet at the same time allowed for him to place a monument within the city of Rome, where he was doing his most notable religious and diplomatic missions. [58]

The Cardinal's Choice of a *Pietà*

After selecting a place of burial within the Saint Petronilla Chapel in Rome, Jean Bilhères needed a sculpture to adorn his tomb. It was not unusual for some French Cardinals to participate

[52] Ibid., 243-244.
[53] Ibid., 244.
[54] Ibid., 243-244.
[55] Samaran, *Bilhères-Lagraulas,* 78.
[56] Fenichel, "Patronage, Liturgy, and Mourning": 869.
[57] Bardati, "Patronage of French Cardinals: 38-63, 50.
[58] Samaran, *Bilhères-Lagraulas,* 79.

in Roman cultural life and artistic commissions. Jean Bilhères was among those interested in commissioning art and architecture to leave their mark upon Rome, even after death.[59] Given his youth in France and extensive interaction with the French monarchy, the Cardinal decided to commission a sculpture of a *Pietà* for his tomb. At first glance a *Pietà* is the perfect religious iconography for Jean's tomb. However, it was also an unusual iconography for Italian sculpture. Besides being a familiar iconography for him and reminiscent of his homeland, it was imbued with a particularly French meaning and flavor that would have to be newly discovered by an Italian audience since they were not as used to seeing and interpreting it.

While it is important to outline Jean Bilhères' politically French perspective, it is also important to recognize his religious standpoints, and what could have led him to choosing this iconography for a tomb. The Virgin Mary for the French "functions as an exemplar to the faith in grieving, as the consummate intercessor to the sinful, as the path for their salvation through her Assumption, and as their hope for redemption in her role as the Queen of Heaven. She is the faithful Christian's advocate and guide, especially in the matter of death and dying." [60]

The French began to see Mary as the Mediatrix, which helped set the tone in how she was depicted within art and ritual. Mary was seen as the woman who could bring a balance between the human world and that of the spiritual world. She was the grounding to everything they knew.[61] Rosemary Wright says in *Sacred Distance: Representing the Virgin* that "the blend of ardent devotion and rational argument derived from theologies of Parisian Schools of the thirteenth centuries produced a compelling theology of Mary as mediator with her son for flawed humanity."[62]

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[59] Bardati, "Patronage of French Cardinals": 40.
[60] Fenichel "Patronage, Liturgy, and Mourning": 866.
[61] Pelikan *Mary Through the Centuries*, 130-131.
[62] Wright, *Sacred Distance*, 86.

This view of Mary was championed by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), a French reformer of the Benedictine order whose writings remained influential centuries after his death. In Bernard's theology of Mary, the Saint insisted on her role as "our Mediatrix, she is the one through whom we have received thy mercy, O God, she is the one through whom we, too, have welcomed the Lord Jesus into our homes".[63] Mary became essentially a mediator between her Son and humility. Her status, especially to the Benedictines, was seen as "royal," as she was the Queen of Heaven and the link between Earth and beyond. By praying to the Virgin directly, those prayers were viewed as having the capacity to be channeled to God.

This doctrine would be followed by those of several other Benedictine abbots such as Saint Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) and Guibert of Nogent (c. 1055-1124).[64] Wright states that "the glorification of the Virgin as the Queen of Heaven also stressed the uniqueness of her person by setting her aside from humankind as a special category of being".[65] In this way, the French viewed the Virgin as a monumental aspect of their faith, as she was the one who controlled the way between life and death. This could explain why the French's depictions within sculptural groups such as the *Pietà* generally portrayed Mary in heavier drapery than that of the Germans- there was an interpretation of the Virgin as not only the Mother, but as the Queen in which all their prayers would be heard.

As a man of the Benedictine order, Jean Bilhères would have been extremely familiar with the theological thought of Mary being the Mediatrix as well as the Queen of Heaven. For Jean, Mary would have been a perfect step between God and himself, to whom the people within Saint Petronilla Chapel could offer prayers after his death. This exchange would parallel how the French

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[63] Pelikan *Mary Through the Centuries*, 132.
[64] Ibid., 133-35.
[65] Wright, *Sacred Distance*, 82.

nobility had been utilizing these kinds of *Pietà* sculptures to adorn their chapels and burial sites with a monumental image of Mary cradling her dead son in order to channel prayers for the royal family. In fact, Jean's religious occupations would have instilled even deeper within him the importance of a *Pietà,* given the fact that these sculptures were often adorning secondary altars in burial chapels within France. However, Jean was commissioning this sculpture to be the center of his burial place, creating an even more monumental significance of this statue for his tomb in Rome.[66] As Bilhères was nearing the end of his life and seeking to commission a work to represent his heritage, the *Pietà* would have been the perfect vision of a man with both political and religious importance in France. Not only was Jean relating himself to the royal family with such a significant French iconography, but he was also aware of the idea of what Mary as Mediatrix, and the Queen of Heaven could provide for him in the afterlife.

By having a very French iconography in a French chapel, the Cardinal was able to provide a place of worship and reflection not only for his own burial, but for the French people who were seeking connections through the Virgin Mary. At the same time, the Cardinal was successfully representing himself by paying homage to the Kings of France in Rome. The Cardinals and Clergy continued to celebrate Lagraulas after his death for years to come, in relation to the chapel and his monumental sculpture.[67]

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[66] Fenichel mentions that "as a French nobleman and a Cardinal, Jean Bilhères Lagraulas would have been advantageously positioned to understand the role that sculptural *Pietàs* played in religious life in France and why such a monument would have been particularly appropriate for his tomb. *Pietà* statues were popular throughout France in the fifteenth century, appearing in churches, private homes, and illustrations in breweries, and particularly in secondary altars in burial chapels". Fenichel "Patronage, Liturgy, and Mourning": 878.
[67] Ibid., 877.

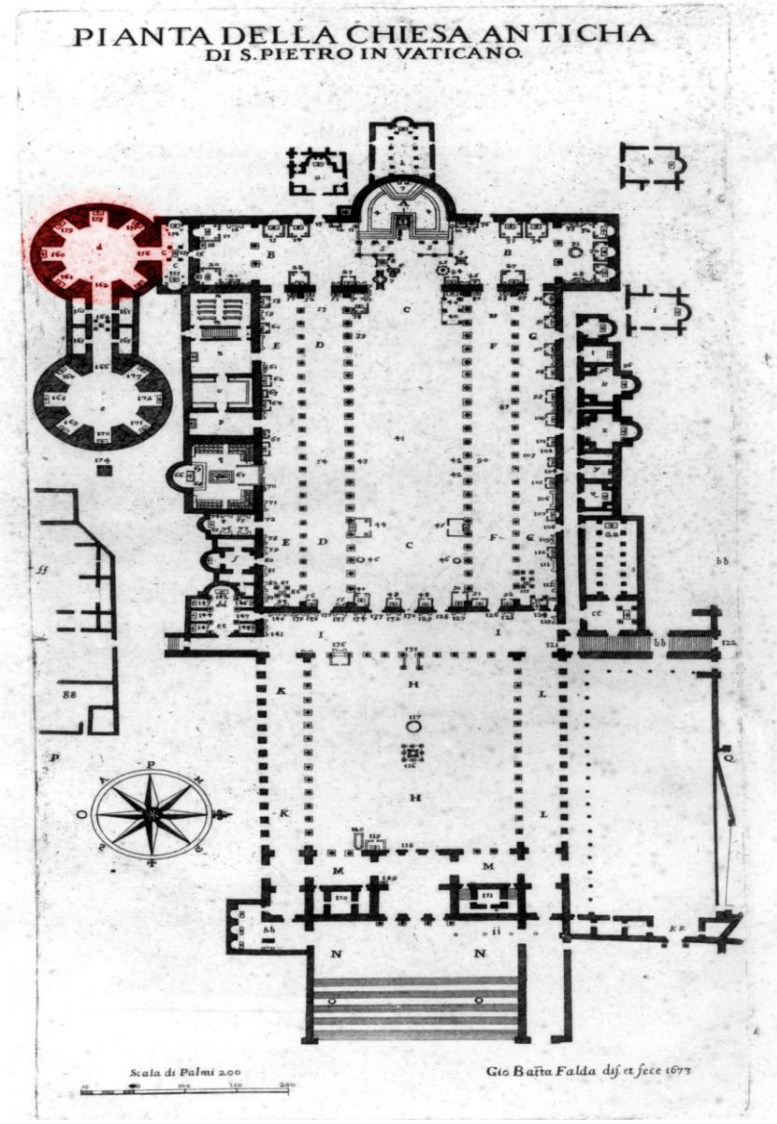

Figure 6: *Almae Urbis divi Petri veteris novique Templi descriptio (Plan of Old St Peter's with its relationship to the new Basilica, highlighting Saint Petronilla)*; after Tiberia Alfrarano; 1590; Italian; etching.

SECTION III: THE VATICAN PIETÀ COMMISSION

The Contract

When it came time to finally commission the sculpture that would adorn his tomb, Bilhères needed to find a sculptor for such a significant piece of art. Through the recommendation of an acquaintance, he would contract a young Florentine sculptor named Michelangelo Buonarroti who was currently working in Rome.

Michelangelo came to the attention of Jean through Sienese Banker Jacopo Galli, who was handling the finances of several Roman Cardinals, and who had recently purchased two sculptures by the young artist for display in the garden of his house in Rome.[68] Admiring the sculptures he saw by Michelangelo, including a Bacchus which he saw within Galli's Garden, Jean decided to hire him and asked Galli to arrange a contract for him. [69]

On August 27th, 1498, Jacopo Galli, and Cardinal Jean Bilhères de Lagraulas drafted the famous contract of the *Pietà* commission that reads, in an English translation:

> "On the 27th day of the month of August 1498…
>
> Be it known and manifest to all who will read this document that the Most Reverend Cardinal of Saint-Denis has agreed with master Michelangelo, Florentine sculptor, that the said master will make at his (the Cardinal's) expense, a *Pietà* in marble, that is the Virgin Mary clothed, with Christ dead in her arms, as large as a (life sized) well-proportioned man, for a price of 450 gold ducats of papal coinage, to be paid within one year from the beginning of the work. And the said Most Reverend Cardinal promises (agrees) to pay in the following manner, that is, to start with, he promises to pay 150 gold ducats of papal coinage before the work is started,

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[68] Cardinal Riario, an acquaintance of Jacopo Galli had supposedly purchased a sculpture of Michelangelo's known as the *Sleeping Cupid*, but it ended up being a counterfeit version of an antique sculpture. After overcoming his disappointment with the counterfeit piece of art, Riario commissioned *Bacchus* from Michelangelo in 1496. However, Riario was not a fan of Michelangelo's *Bacchus*, and rejected the artwork due to its unsettling drunkenness, sexualization, and unmet expectations regarding the nature of its antique style. The rejection of this artwork led to Michelangelo having an unsuccessful debut in Rome. From there, Galli had purchased Bacchus for his garden, and this sculpture would have been the one in which Lagraulas saw when meeting with the banker. See Unger *Life in Six Masterpieces,* 49-55.

[69] This event was recorded by Michelangelo's 16th century biographer, Giorgio Vasari. Vasari mentions how Michelangelo's reputation after Galli's patronage had begun to take off and that "these things caused the Cardinal Saint Denis, a Frenchman, called Rovano, to form the desire of leaving in that renowned city some memorial for himself by the hand of so famous an artist. He therefore commissioned Michelangelo to execute a *Pietà* of marble in full relief; and this, when finished, was placed in San Pietro, in the chapel of Santa Maria della Febbre, namely, at the temple of Mars." See Giorgio Vasari and Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, Lives *of The Most Eminent Painters. Vol. II.* George Macy Companies Inc., 1967, 115.

> and once the work is started he agrees to pay 100 ducats of the same coinage to the said (above mentioned) Michelangelo every four months, so that the aforementioned 450 gold ducats of papal coinage will be completely paid in one year, if the said work will be completed; and if the work will be completed before the year (is over), his Most Reverend Lordship will pay the remainder (balance) at once.
>
> And I, Iacopo Gallo, guarantee (promise) the Most Reverend Monsignor that the said Michelangelo will complete the said work within one year and that it will be the most beautiful work in marble to be seen today in Rome, and that no other master could produce a better work. And, on the other hand, I guarantee (promise) the said Michelangelo that the Most Reverend Cardinal will pay in accordance with the above stipulation. And in witness therefore, I, Iacopo Gallo, have written a present document with my own hand, on the above inscribed year, month, and day. It is understood that this document renders null and void any other such document written by me or by the hands of the above-mentioned master Michelangelo, and that this agreement is only a valid one. The Most Reverend Cardinal has given to me, Iacopo, some time ago, two hundred gold ducats of Chamber coinage and today fifty gold ducats of papal coinage. It is so Ioannes, Cardinal S. Dyonisii, I agree to the same Jacobus Gallus, by his own hand." [70]

It is important to note that even before the contract was drafted, Bilhères was in contact with Michelangelo regarding the *Pietà*. Michelangelo was sent to Carrara, Italy, on the account of

[70] Lombardo, *Pietà and Other Masterpieces*, 28-29.

the Cardinal in November of 1497 so that Michelangelo could find the perfect piece of marble for the artwork. Michelangelo returned to Rome in March of 1498, and the marble that he had chosen on that trip arrived on August 30th of the same year. The surviving contract between the Cardinal and the artist, overseen by Galli, was drawn up within the same month of August, upon Michelangelo's return to the Holy City.[71]

Unfortunately, Jean became sick from a violent fever on July 26th, 1499. He died on August 6th, 1499, before he could see the sculpture's unveiling, as it took Michelangelo another few months to complete it.[72] In the meantime, Jean had left specific instructions for the arrangements of his burial, the documents of which now have been lost. Scholars do know, however, that Jean's body was interred in a tomb under the pavement of the Saint Petronilla Chapel, his head still wearing his miter. Concurrently to the *Pietà,* Jean had commissioned, from an unknown artist, a marble slab to mark his burial place. The carved marble slab showed him in effigy, laid out for his funeral, which was a common display of 15th and 16th century Cardinals like Lagraulas. **(Figure 7)** Jean's personal letters state that he was intending for the *Pietà* to be part of a larger altar in conjunction with this floor slab effigy.[73]

Due to lack of writing and documentation of the *Pietà* when it was in Saint Petronilla Chapel, scholars argue as to how and where the sculpture would have been placed. It is assumed by writers such as Emily Fenichel that the sculpture would have been placed much closer to the public than displayed today, and that it would have sat either on the floor of the Chapel, or on a

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[71] Antonio Paolucci, *La Pietà di San Pietro: Storia e Restauro 40 Anni Dopo*. Città del Vaticano: Edizioni Musei Vaticani, 2014, 49.
[72] Samaran, *Bilhères-Lagraulas,* 67.
[73] It is unknown who the sculptor of the floor slab for Jean's tomb was. This slab now lies underneath the new Saint Peter's Basilica, as it was moved from its original location when Saint Petronilla Chapel was torn down. The slab, and Jean's remains are now separated from the *Pietà* completely. Fenichel, "Patronage, Liturgy, and Mourning": 869-70.

slightly elevated platform in a niche. It would not make sense for this tomb monument to be a part of a larger altarpiece, as it is assumed that it was the intention of the Cardinal to have the sculpture accessible to the viewers. This seems to be the most probable placement of the work as, since it was intended for a tomb, and given the context of the culture of the French monarch to erect these sculptures for prayers dedicated to the royal family, Jean probably would have imagined that his *Pietà* would serve the same function.

After Jean's death, the other French cardinals took charge of making sure his tomb and monument became completed.[74] With the death of his patron, Michelangelo had to fulfill Jean's vision of a *Pietà*, relying on his own artistic lens.

Figure 7: *Line Drawing of the Effigy of Jean de Bilhères Lagraulas' Tomb, Saint Peter's Basilica;* Crypt of Saint Peter's in Rome; Courtesy of Charles Samaran, 1879.

[74] Samaran, *Bilhères-Lagraulas*, 68-69.

SECTION IV: MICHELANGELO BUONARROTI: THE ARTIST

When considering how best to go about creating a *Pietà* for the Cardinal, Michelangelo might have searched his mind for some sort of Italian examples of the image, as there is no record of whether or not Jean gave Michelangelo any particular examples of a Northern European type of a *Pietà* to follow. The consideration of the lessons that other artists' examples could contain was in line with the way that the artist worked in his youth. Michelangelo, studying under Dominico Ghirlandaio (1448-1494), learned to sculpt by viewing several older Florentine artists' works, such as Donatello (1386-1466).[75]

At the age of seventeen, Michelangelo sculpted his famous *Battle of the Centaurs*- a study attempting to copy the manner of Donatello, yet Michelangelo was able to amplify its design. Michelangelo's biographer, Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), mentions how Michelangelo was able to copy antique artwork yet make them better, becoming a master of both classicizing as well as contemporary trends in art. Michelangelo, being a favorite artist among the leading Florentine art patrons, the Medici family, had the keys to Lorenzo de Medici's (1449-1492) gardens, where the young artist was able to study the collection of antique sculptures at his own leisure.[76] Lorenzo's

[75] As Michelangelo came of age, he befriended Francesco Granacci, who was part of the workshop of Dominico Ghirlandaio, a notable Florentine artist. Granacci supplied Michelangelo with designs and drawings from Ghirlandaio's workshop. At the age of fourteen, Michelangelo's father placed him within the workshop of Ghirlandaio to begin his training. Vasari mentions that Michelangelo was so successful in his studies, that he seemed to become an equal to Ghirlandaio's work, if not surpassing him early on. At the time, Lorenzo the Magnificent was interested in forming a "School of Good Painters and Sculptors", to seek out young artists who could become the next generation to surpass Donatello. Ghirlandaio recruited a few of his best artists for this new school, Michelangelo being among them. Michelangelo became a favorite of the Medici family and was even invited to live with Lorenzo the Magnificent and his family for around four years, until Lorenzo's death in 1492. See Vasari and Lavin, *Lives of The Most Eminent Painters,* 108-111.

[76] Ibid., 111-113.

garden, according to Vasari, was "adorned with valuable antiques and excellent pictures", providing Michelangelo with the resources to better himself as an artist.[77]

During Michelangelo's youth, many scholars speculate that the artist was also interested in interacting with the morgue located in the Florentine church of Santo Spirito, which would become prominent in his studies of the human body and his extensive knowledge of anatomy within his sculptural subjects.[78] At the time, Michelangelo had created a sculpture in wood of a crucifix for the church to please the prior who had given him a room to dissect bodies. This gives way to the evidence of how Michelangelo was able to perfect the human bodies in his design, along with his study of classical artwork within Lorenzo de Medici's Garden.[79]

However, though Michelangelo had the privilege to study from the great Ghirlandaio and had access to all these antique sculptures in the Medici Gardens, there were no known large-scale Italian sculptural examples of the *Pietà* for him to consider. Therefore, when the time came to sculpt the first large scale *Pietà* in Italy, Michelangelo had to look towards painted examples for inspiration. In Florence, there was definitely not a lack of *Pietà* painting within Michelangelo's reach since the *Pietà* reached the peak of its popularity in Northern Europe in the last half of the fifteenth century, just about the time that Michelangelo received the commission to produce one, and the iconography had, by then, found its way to Italy in the form of painting.[80]

One such painting was Pietro Perugino's (c. 1446/1452 -1523) *Pietà* of 1493-96. **(Figure 8)** This *Pietà* was painted by Perugino for the Church of San Giusto alle Mura in Florence and

[77] Ibid., 113.
[78] Miles Unger, *Life in Six Masterpieces*, 64-65.
[79] Vasari and Lavin, *Lives of The Most Eminent Painters*, 113.
[80] Ziegler, "Michelangelo and the Medieval Pietà": 29.

would have been visible for Michelangelo who was actively working in Florence until 1494. Perugino was quite a reputable artist in Italy whose work was not unfamiliar to Florentines as he was a contemporary of Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519) and later was an inspiration for his fellow painter from the Italian region of Umbria, Raphael (1483-1520).

Perugino's depiction of a *Pietà* is quite different from the French examples Jean Bilhères would have been familiar with when he had this iconography in mind for his tomb in Saint Petronilla. Perugino's *Pietà*, for instance, is a crowded composition. It has much in common with a *Lamentation* scene, which usually depicts several Christian figures from the story of the Crucifixion, including Mary Magdalene and Saint John the Evangelist. In contrast, in typical Northern European *Pietà* scenes, Mary is isolated, alone with her dead son. No other elements of the biblical story are present. Michelangelo would have rejected this crowded scene, as the Cardinal specifically requested an isolated depiction of Mary and Jesus within his commission, so it would not make sense to portray the scene in the lens of Perugino.

Perugino's *Pietà* also depicts the body of Christ in an unusual way from Northern European examples. In the painting, Christ's body has somewhat muscular proportions, shows no signs of emaciation, and has barely any visible wounds. The weight of Christ's rather elongated body is distributed among the three central figures in the scene and is not laying across the Virgin's lap alone. By contrast, in French examples, Christ's body is not nearly as elongated as Perugino's and His weight is usually fully supported by His mother. The heavier drapery of the Virgin within these typically French sculptures helps to support the body of Christ, whereas Perugino's *Pietà* seems to be lacking this monumentality.

Therefore, though Michelangelo would have known this example well in Florence and could have looked to it for inspiration, the *Pietà* that he would make is so vastly different, that it is highly unlikely that it served as any important reference point for inspiration for his work.

It is clear that Michelangelo's stylistic choices for his *Pietà* would stem more from the classical examples of sculpture that he gained from study of antiques and the anatomical studies he was conducting at Santo Spirito, rather than the works of painters such as Perugino.

Figure 8: *Pietà;* Perugino (c.1450-1523); c.1493-1496; Tempera and Oil on Wood Panel; 168 cm x 176 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

When considering other examples Michelangelo may have been familiar with, and thinking about, when commissioned by the Cardinal in 1498 for a *Pietà*, it is significant to consider his work in Bologna. After the death of Lorenzo de Medici, rumors of a French invasion by Charles VIII began circulating in Florence, and in 1494 Michelangelo fled the town, eventually making his

way to Bologna.[81] There, Michelangelo would have been exposed to an entirely new realm of art, including being directly exposed to more Northern European prototypes of the *Pietà* image. One Italian example of a painted *Pietà* that scholars know was in a place where the artist would have been likely to encounter it is a *Pietà* painted by Ercole de' Roberti (1451-1496). This painting was created just years before Michelangelo's visit to the city and, during Michelangelo's lifetime, was the center predella panel of the large altarpiece positioned above the high altar currently still in the church of San Giovanni in Monte, Bologna. [82] **(Figure 9)**

Here, Roberti's *Pietà* demonstrates that it is much in debt to the Northern European, specifically German, *Pietà* examples. Unlike Perugino's painting in Florence, the scene depicted here is an isolated one between the Virgin and her son, much like the sculptural groups of the *Pietà* in Northern Europe, and similar to the one in which Jean might have envisioned for himself. Also, like the German prototypes, Roberti's *Pietà* emphasizes both the bodily suffering of Christ before his death and the emotional suffering of the Virgin.

Roberti's Northern European inspired figure of Christ is slightly more emaciated than the example from Florence, yet His arms drop by His side and do not lay on His torso. Roberti's work seems to also be related to the French *Pietà* examples in its depiction of the Virgin Mary. In the Bolognese painting, Mary comfortably supports Christ in her lap, with her thicker and more

[81] Lombardo, *Pietà and Other Masterpieces*, 18- 19.

[82] Dunkleman writes that "It is true that Northern Pietà groups from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries would have been easily available to Michelangelo. There is a German example in San Domenico in Bologna, where Michelangelo was working, which he would certainly have seen". This was referring to a German sculpture of a Pietà. He would have known this sculptural German example, along with Roberti's painting when working in Bologna. See Martha Dunkleman, "What Michelangelo Learned in Bologna." Artibus et Historiae 35, no. 69 (2014): 118.

monumental drapery. The spread of her gown over her bent legs makes the Virgin appear almost as a pyramidal composition within this scene. [83]

Having looked at other Italian examples of the *Pietà,* both central Italian and from Bologna, we will see that Michelangelo will both accept and reject various ideas from these depictions, and would ultimately create a very different version of a *Pietà* from both the Northern examples and the Italian examples, where the emphasis is on more of a theatrical type of emotional exaggeration to be read by the viewer. Michelangelo's sculpture is in direct empathy with Mary, as she cradles and looks down upon Christ in her lap, with a sense of spirituality and melancholy. However, even these Northern works were still barely comparable to what Michelangelo accomplished with his own *Pietà* sculpture, placing Michelangelo's work at a transitional point in history.[84] It is reasonable then, that Michelangelo's ideas could reflect that of Jean Bilhères' own vision of the French, yet blended harmoniously with the artist's own knowledge of "good art" from his home in Florence, his own religious ideas, and studies of classical sculpture.

[83] Dunkleman mentions that "in Quercia's reliefs, furthermore, many figures are dressed in a heavy drapery style that resembles that seen in Michelangelo's work and is unlike Donatello." This could further support that this heavy drapery was an enormous influence of the North. See Dunkleman, "What Michelangelo Learned in Bologna": 116.

[84] Ziegler speculates that not only would Michelangelo have known this example in Bologna but also would have been familiar with Flemish examples as well, further supporting the evidence of Michelangelo being aware of the iconography in his time. At the time, *Pietàs* did exist on a large scale in terms of sculpture in Flanders at the time, so it can be assumed Michelangelo may have known examples from this area as well when considering the design for his Vatican *Pietà*. Ziegler also mentions that "just shortly after Michelangelo completed his *Pietà*, he was involved in making a sculpture that was destined for Flanders itself: The *Virgin and Child* for the Church of our Lady in Bruges. It was sent to Flanders in 1506, and paid for in a first installment in 1503, which means that likely it had been carved concurrently with or immediately following completion of the *Pietà*." See Ziegler, "Michelangelo and the Medieval Pietà": 32.

Figure 9: *Pietà;* Ercole de' Roberti; 1482 - 1486; Burgundy; Oil Paint, Tempera; Panel; Framed: 54.5cm x 51.0cm x 10.2cm; National Liverpool Museum.

Michelangelo's Upbringing

Besides his artistic training, one the most significant influences on Michelangelo's life were his clear devotion to the Catholic faith, particularly as laid out in the sermons of the popular Florentine Dominican Friar Savonarola (1452-98). It must be made clear that there is no distinct evidence that Savonarola played any role in Michelangelo's artistic tradition, but the preacher definitely made a spiritual impact on the artist.[85]

[85] Dominican Friar Girolamo Savonarola gained significant popularity within Florence, Italy in 1490, and was quick to take advantage of the political and religious unrest and confusion during the time of the French invasion of 1494- the same invasion that drove Michelangelo out of Florence. Savonarola became a head of a religious dictatorship that occurred until he was burned in 1498, eventually becoming a martyr. See James M. Saslow, *The Poetry of Michelangelo: An Annotated Translation*. Yale University, 1991, 10.

While Michelangelo was in Rome, around the same time that he obtained the commission for the *Pietà*, there are letters that demonstrate his interest in Savonarola's sermons. Michelangelo's brother, Lionardo Buonarroti was a Dominican Friar, and Savonarola's name was often mentioned in the letters of the brothers, who discussed his ideas with one another.[86] Lombardo makes it evident in *Michelangelo the Pietà and Other Masterpieces* that "Condivi says that Michelangelo always had a great love for the reformer and preacher. Between 1490 and 1498, the year of was to play out, in his art, poetry, and personal relationships, the central spiritual-aesthetic conflict of his age symbolized by the successive Florentine regimes of his youth; a struggle between the ascetic, puritanical strain of his Christian culture and the more earthly, sensual ideas of classical pastorale and myth."[87]

This idea becomes evident when analyzing the stylistic decisions of Michelangelo's *Pietà* sculpture. When discussing Michelangelo's style as an artist, Lombardo makes it clear that "he was a humanist in his search for ideal beauty and he elevated art to a dignity and influence unknown before his time. A good Christian, he absorbed all the knowledge and attributes of the fifteenth century Italian Renaissance and culminated the High Renaissance in Italy in the early part of the sixteenth century."[88]

SECTION V: SCULPTING THE PIETÀ: MICHELANGELO'S STYLISTIC CHOICES

For Michelangelo, the layout of the Chapel of Saint Petronella would have been another major consideration when deciding how to go about sculpting such a significant work as the

[86] R. W. Carden *Michelangelo: A Record of His Life as Told in His Own Letters and Papers*, Constable & Company, 1913, 4-5.
[87] Saslow, *Poetry of Michelangelo*, 10.
[88] Lombardo, *Pietà and Other Masterpieces*, 12.

Cardinal's *Pietà*. Saint Petronilla's rounded room would have allowed worshippers to view a sculpture of this monumentality from many angles, allowing for active viewing within the room. The sculpture would have been illuminated by high windows and candlelight, which would have contributed to the display in such a way that viewers could interact with the contrasts and textures of the work, further catching the eye of those who saw it.[89]

Antonio Paolucci thinks that the *Pietà* was probably placed in a niche above the altar of the patron Saint of France, and that it would have been visible from a great distance along the longitudinal access of the basilica due to its placement. It would have been positioned not too high, seen from a three-quarter view or frontal, and the smoothness of the marble would have ensured the sculpture would illuminate itself in a dimly lit room.[90]

When analyzing Michelangelo Buonarroti's Vatican *Pietà*, it is clear that there are several distinctive formal elements that define it as a work, especially when juxtaposing it to those of the Northern European and Italian prototypes. **(Figures 10-14)** In reference to the figure of Christ, we see that Michelangelo focuses on a classicizing depiction of Christ that is heroic and idealized rather than simply a corpse. Though the drapery of the Virgin and arm positioning of Christ do resemble Michelangelo's work, there still seems to be a clear separation between Michelangelo's sculpture and Northern depictions of the iconography. Michelangelo's sculpture is a heartbeat of a moment crystalized in marble, pure and moving precisely because it is somehow removed from the viewer's world.

[89] Fenichel, "Patronage, Liturgy, and Mourning": 872-75.
[90] Paolucci, *La Pietà di San Pietro,* 51-52.

A first point that can be made about Michelangelo's *Pietà* is the idealization of Christ's body. In Northern European examples of the *Pietà* iconography, there is often a focus upon emaciation, suffering, and grief. Lombardo makes a fantastic point in his book of how Christ's body is portrayed, stating that "if Michelangelo had depicted a corpse, convention would have required him to show a stiff, inflexible, and rigid body, in the tradition of less imaginative artists. Rigidity does not lend itself to creative or expressive interpretation. A graceful cadaver would be an incongruous and unnatural repudiation of its physical nature or its reality. By portraying Christ before death, Michelangelo was able to create a beautiful and rhythmic composition of great forcefulness."[91]

Scholars such as Lombardo assume that Michelangelo's Christ is not actually dead due to the lack of morbidity within the figure. In fact, within the sculpture, it appears that Christ is gripping His loincloth, and we see the clear extension of muscles within His arms, as well as the extension of veins.[92] Vasari makes an interesting point in his biography of Michelangelo, saying that "the veins and pulses, moreover are indicated with so much exactitude that one cannot but marvel how the hand of the artist should in a short time have produced such a work, or how a stone, which just before was without form or shape, should all at once display such perfection as nature can but rarely produce in the flesh".[93]

Here in Michelangelo's work, the artist completely departs from these ideologies and provides us with a work of art that is oriented towards classical antiquity and heroization, rather than the physical pain of Christ's.[94] Christ is depicted in a muscular way that is far different from

[91] Lombardo, P*ietà and Other Masterpieces*, 34.
[92] Ibid, 35.
[93] Vasari and Lavin, *Lives of The Most Eminent Painters*, 116.
[94] Zöllner and Thoenes, *The Complete Works*, 33.

its Northern European predecessors. There is a smoothness of the marble, as if the morbidity of Michelangelo's work comes from the coldness of the marble itself, and not the way Christ is depicted. Michelangelo even goes as far as minimizing the wounds of Christ, a striking difference from normal types of this iconography.

Although French *Pietàs* were far less emaciated and wounded than those of Germany for instance, in his work Michelangelo is completely transforming this idea by removing any indication that Christ is really suffering at all. There is a slight indication of a gash in His side, but there is no blood or large, gaping wound that resembles those of the Northern European examples.[95] In this way, Michelangelo is portraying a muscular, idealized and heroized body, one in which resembles classical ideas of Rome, which he could have been reflecting back on from his studies of Lorenzo de Medici's gardens. It is also undeniable that the perfect proportions of Christ could have also very well have reflected on Michelangelo's study in the morgue of Santo Spirito, further enforcing his Florentine studies in the work.[96]

Not only are there classical traditions of sculpture taking place, but there seems to also be an underlying religious meaning in the way Christ is portrayed, as indicated by Unger in *Michelangelo: A Life in Six Masterpieces*. Unger says that "all artists who depict Jesus must grapple with his dual nature, human and divine, conveying his otherworldly spirit with a body that is wholly flesh and blood. Michelangelo implies this through a beauty that is unconquerable even in death, a beauty that foreshadows the Resurrection still to come."[97]

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[95] Unger, *Life in Six Masterpieces*, 64-65.
[96] Ibid., 64-65.
[97] Ibid., 65.

Supposedly, there were theological debates that go all the way back to the eleventh century that focused on the issue of Christ's death. If we are looking at Michelangelo's heroic Christ through the standpoint of contemporary doctrines, an allusion can be inferred that the artist was being mindful of religious ideas of his hometown of Florence.

Doctrines such as those of Savonarola indicate that a being of divine nature such as Christ cannot be compromised, and His body after death would be deemed incorruptible.[98] Rumy Hilloowala in "The St. Peter's 'Pietà': A Madonna and Child? An Anatomical and Psychological Reevaluation" makes the point that "Michelangelo deviated from authority and tradition because aesthetically he could not bring himself to favor the ugliness of death and the horror of suffering, as did the other artists whose intentions were to arouse compassion and heighten devotion."[99]

The most significant aspect of Michelangelo's *Pietà* however is not that of Christ, but of Mary herself. The idea of Mary was not only steeped within Jean Bilhères' Benedictine traditions as the monumentalized Queen of Heaven, but she also played a significant role within the sermons of Savonarola, which Michelangelo would have been highly familiar with. According to Domenican theology, Mary is full of grace and is placed directly under Christ in the supernatural hierarchy of divine being, and therefore is above all creatures in her perfection.[100] Virginity was the center of Savonarola's theology, and it was made clear by this doctrine that Mary was not subject to age, and her body was not subject to human corruption.[101] Therefore, when

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[98] Fernec Veress, "Michelangelo e Savonarola: La Pietà Di San Pietro." *Zeitschrift Für Kunstgeschichte* 73, no. 4 (2010): 541-42.
[99] Rumy Hilloowala and Jerome Oremland. "The St. Peter's 'Pietà': A Madonna and Child? An Anatomical and Psychological Reevaluation." *Leonardo* 20, no. 1 (1987): 88.
[100] Veress, "Michelangelo e Savonarola": 541-542.
[101] Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries*, 128.

Michelangelo sculpted his Virgin, she appeared youthful and uncorrupt, as his theology would have depicted.

However, to Michelangelo's contemporaries, the youthfulness of the Virgin struck a significant amount of controversy. Generally, in depictions of the *Pietà,* Mary was depicted in her human suffering, which included the wrinkles of time upon her face. Contemporaries often disapproved of the way in which Michelangelo depicted his Virgin in such a way that she appeared even more youthful than her son laying across her lap.[102] In reaction to the contemporaneous outrage of Mary's youthfulness, Michelangelo argued that chaste women retain their younger faces for much longer than those who are not chaste, and therefore Mary's face was not subject to age.[103]

Michelangelo makes the statement in his lifetime that "do you know that chaste women maintain their fresh (or youthful) appearance much longer than those who are not? How much more so would this be in a Virgin, never even touched by the slightest impurity of (carnal) desire, which might have altered her appearance? I would add moreover that it is credible that this freshness and bloom (flower) of youth, besides being maintained in her by such natural means, were fostered (aided) by the work of God (the Divine) in order to give proof to the world of the virginity and perpetual (eternal) purity of the Mother".[104]

Michelangelo's significant argument here is essential to understanding the religious, yet at the same time stylistic, choices of the young artist when creating such a striking sculpture for the

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[102] Unger, *Life in Six Masterpieces*, 65-67.
[103] Ibid., 65-67.
[104] For more on Michelangelo's discussion of Mary, see Lombardo, *Pietà and Other Masterpieces*, 44.
It is also significant to note that this ideology of the Savonarola Doctrine was demonstrated by other Florentine artists as well, including Perugino's Pietà painting from 1493-95, which demonstrates a rather youthful Virgin and a barely emaciated or wounded Jesus Christ. So perhaps, this reflects Michelangelo's Florentine stylistic traditions as well, including what he saw in Bologna. See Veress, "Michelangelo e Savonarola": 553.

Cardinal. This way in which Michelangelo depicted the Virgin could also be connected to the Cardinal's own faith when commissioning the artwork, reflecting back on the Mary of Mediatrix ideology of the Benedictines, in which Mary was seen as the figure that separates the human from the divine. In her divinity, she has not aged. Yet, as a mother, her humanity is demonstrated through the solemn expression upon her face, as she gazes down in reflection at the body of her deceased child.

The calmness of the Virgin's face reinforces the idea that she knows what is to come, and that she is mourning her son, but also is aware of His body being at peace to redeem the world.[105] In 1490, Savonarola spoke of the joys of contemplation, and how Mary, after Christ was taken from the cross, contemplated the face of her child. Yet, at the same time, Savonarola recalls how Mary was also at peace, as she recalled the scripture alluding to the fate of her precious child. As the Virgin looks down onto the body of her son, she is mournfully contemplative.[106] This evidence, and Michelangelo's interest in Savonarola's doctrine can further reinforce this idea of the Virgin's youthful face, and solemn expression, which differs from the usual depictions of an extremely distraught Virgin in the *Pietà* iconography of Northern Europe. Michelangelo, in this way, creates an intimate scene between a mother and her child, which can be argued as timeless.

Another highly significant aspect of Michelangelo's *Pietà* is the monumentality of the Virgin. Michelangelo's Madonna is positioned with her knees spread outward to cradle Christ's body comfortably in her lap. However, there is an abnormality about this image, as the Virgin is larger than Christ, allowing her to be able to hold the weight of His body. Lombardo discusses how "many scholars maintain that the figure of Christ is unnaturally small and that Michelangelo

[105] Unger, *Life in Six Masterpieces*, 65-67.
[106] Veress, "Michelangelo e Savonarola": 555.

may have been influenced by French *Pietàs* or the Northern *Vesperbild*, which traditionally as already noted, used a small under-life-size figure for Christ."[107] Perhaps in depicting Christ in a smaller form, it is focusing on the idea of Mary, holding her child once again in her arms and reflecting upon His life, as she herself feels like a child in grieving. This stylistic choice was most likely decided upon due to Jean Bilhères' request for a monumental Virgin Mary, in which her heroic size creates a diminutive version of Christ by design. The Virgin Mary is depicted in this work in a pyramidal composition, a design choice often seen in works of the High Renaissance, which help depict monumentality of figures.[108]

The way that Michelangelo depicted the Virgin's head gives us another example of the sculptor taking liberty with form for emotional effect, this time through a classical convention. Although the Virgin's and Christ's bodies are different sizes, the Virgin's head is the same size as Christ's. This is generally an aspect of sculptures from Greek antiquity, such as in works like *The Hermes, 350 BC* by Praxiteles in Olympia and the *Agias, 337 BC* in Delphi by Lysippus. Works such as these often had a smaller head compared to the body, which reinforced the heroic nature of the figure.[109]

Michelangelo's use of heavy drapery for his *Pietà* Virgin, a stylistic choice that reflects the *Pietàs* of France that Lagraulas would have known, also reinforces her larger-than-life status. In terms of the Virgin's heavy drapery, not only is this stylistic choice steeped within French tradition, but in Florentine traditions as well. Her clothing resembles that of figures found in works by prominent Florentine artists such as Donatello, Verrocchio, Masaccio, and even Giotto. This

[107] Lombardo, *Pietà and Other Masterpieces* ,38.
[108] Ibid., 47-48.
[109] Ibid., 39.

monumental and heavy drapery is also present in what Michelangelo saw in Bologna in artists such as Jacopo Della Quercia.[110] However, even in looking to artists of the past for inspiration, Vasari makes it clear that when Michelangelo created works "he reinterpreted them so creatively that the original idea was completely transfigured."[111]

The Virgin's role as the Mediatrix to the Cardinal would have been prominent in his idea of wanting such a monumental Virgin within his sculptural tomb group. In portraying her in this monumental way, Michelangelo was able to reinforce these Doctrines of not only the Cardinal's ideals but of Savonarola. In the Renaissance, women were often portrayed as strong with virtues, and perhaps the monumentality of Mary could have been reflecting this idea. In Savonarola's sermon of 1495, it was said that the lions who held the seat of Solomon's throne symbolized the firmness and virtues of the Virgin Mary. Perhaps it was in these sermons that Michelangelo was further compelled to monumentalize his Virgin as being a figure who is strong, mighty, and divine.[112] Fenichel argues that "the manipulation of Mary's size also subtly increases the theological importance in the work. Although the relative difference of Mary's size is only apparent on considerable study, the sheer mass that she adds to the composition forces the viewer to think of the work in terms of Mary's reaction to Christ's sacrifice, and not simply to focus on the five wounds on the body of the savior."[113]

One of the most significant aspects of Michelangelo's stylistic choices and how they tie both into his own personal values and that of the Cardinal's was the choice of marble as a medium, and not the typical wooden models of the *Pietà/Vesperbild* in Northern Europe. This decision was

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[110] Antonio Paolucci, *Michelangelo: Le Pietà*, Italiano: Skira, 1997, 17-18.
[111] Lombardo, *Pietà and Other Masterpieces,* 30.
[112] Veress, "Michelangelo e Savonarola": 554-555.
[113] Fenichel, "Patronage, Liturgy, and Mourning": 876.

demonstrated by Jean Bilhères' official request to Michelangelo in the contract, in which stated that he wished for a monumental Virgin in marble. The marble was such an incredibly important aspect to the work, as demonstrated by the Cardinal sending Michelangelo to Carrara to obtain the perfect piece of marble that would become the *Pietà*. The use of marble is what signifies Michelangelo's sculpture as an artwork, and not a typical ritualistic image as were those in Northern Europe. Ziegler speculates that the choice of marble was utilized as the sculpture was meant to be untouched by man, and the sculpture was to be interacted with through prayer alone as the Cardinal's life is contemplated, and prayers are made to the French. In this way, the choice of medium is as significant as the artwork itself.[114]

Emily Fenichel makes it clear that "Cardinal Jean de Bilhères envisioned the Rome *Pietà* from the beginning as an integral part of his immediate and ongoing funerary commemorations. In addition to engaging with the theology of Durandus (ca. 1230-96), Saint Antonius (1389-1459), Saint Bernard (1090-1153), and Savonarola (1452-98), among others, the Rome *Pietà* mirrors and amplifies the vigils and masses for the dead, particularly the service of vespers."[115] As discussed in terms of the Chapel of Saint Petronilla, the use of marble would have allowed the work to illuminate itself in the dark chapel lit by candles. She would have appeared almost divine in her illumination and such light would have helped the viewer to see all the details within the marble. Though colorless, the marble produces such a lifelike quality to the work, and its "coldness" reinforces the idea of psychological complexity of mourning the dead.[116]

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[114] Ziegler, "Michelangelo and the Medieval Pietà": 33-34.

[115] Fenichel, "Patronage, Liturgy, and Mourning": 865.

[116] A final comparison can be made in terms of reinforcing Florentine tradition within this work. Michelangelo's figure of the Virgin, according to many scholars, resembles Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* painting. Though it was never determined if Michelangelo ever had the chance to see this work in person, styles such as Da Vinci's were embedded within Verrocchio and Ghirlandaio's workshops See Veress, "Michelangelo e Savonarola": 548. Rudolph Wittkower writes in "A Note on Michelangelo's Pietà in St. Peter's" that in the depiction of Mary, "the position and expression

There seems to be a lot of contradiction among scholars of the execution of the *Pietà* sculpture, and its intended meaning. Unger writes that Michelangelo's "masterpiece was meant to attract the eye and stimulate the mind; there was never any question that Michelangelo created a cult object like those carried around villages of Germany and Flanders in solemn procession. He was creating, first and foremost, a work of art."[117] Lombardo says that "it is reasonable to assume that the French Cardinal chose the theme of the *Pietà* because of its popularity in France. But this does not necessarily follow that Michelangelo was in any way influenced by the manner of stylization in which the theme was treated by French artists. On the contrary, Michelangelo's interpretation of the *Pietà* has no parallel in either France or Germany."[118]

However, given the evidence of the matter, Michelangelo is clearly steeped in some sort of French tradition at the Cardinal's request, with the drapery and psychological complexity that is unveiled by this politically and emotionally charged work of art. I do agree with Unger in some respect, as it does appear that Michelangelo is interpreting the theme of the *Pietà* in his own stylized and classicized way, which does seem to reinforce it as more of an artistic funerary monument than a cult object. However, it is to be made aware that I do not support the claims that the *Pietà* has absolutely no association to Northern prototypes, when these were really the only examples he could have known, other than what was in Bologna. By applying the concept of a *Pietà* with his own Florentine traditions, as well as simultaneously working at the request of the Cardinal's wishes, Michelangelo's sculpture redefined what a *Pietà* typically was and how it was

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of the (original) hand was very akin to the left hand of Christ in Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*". This signifies even further that while Michelangelo was taking suggestions from the Cardinal in terms of design, he was also looking towards his own knowledge of his contemporaries, and the work they were producing. See Rudolph Wittkower, "A Note on Michelangelo's Pieta in St. Peter's." Journal of the Warburg Institute 2, no. 1 (1938): 80.

[117] Unger, *Life in Six Masterpieces*, 71.

[118] Lombardo, *Pietà and Other Masterpieces*, 31.

received in art. What was once a definition of ritualistic culture for the North has now become an aestheticized and politicized iconography to honor a Cardinal after death.

The purpose of this thesis was to argue that Jean Bilhères' vision as a patron with his political and historically French background combined with Michelangelo's views of classicism and Florentine culture and art forms created a new version of a *Pietà* that redefined the way this sculptural type is viewed and interpreted in art. It appears that while there has been much discussion of the Vatican *Pietà* in terms of its stylistic and aesthetic properties, there has been little said on how it was in fact a politically and religiously charged piece of art. In Northern European art the *Pietà*, and the *Vesperbild* that it was derived from, as an iconography had been, up until the time of Michelangelo, an object of ritualistic meaning, with an intention of psychological complexity in which the viewer interacts with the humanistic aspects of the divine. These German *Vesperbild* images were quite brutal, bloodied, and emaciated. As the iconography spread to France, a monumentality occurred of the Virgin, steeped within the traditions of the Benedictine Monastery, in which Jean Bilhères, Michelangelo's eventual patron would have been familiar with.

As Jean Bilhères became progressively more intertwined in the circle of the King of France and eventually made his way to Rome as a French Cardinal representing both his political affiliations of France and personal religious aspirations, the *Pietà* iconography became increasingly more significant to him. When it was time to choose a burial place, the Cardinal chose none other than Saint Petronilla- a chapel dedicated to the King of France, in which he would commission a tomb altarpiece. Bilhères chose the young artist Michelangelo, steeped in the Florentine tradition of classicism and Savonarola theology to complete the task of creating a monumental Virgin in marble to adorn his funerary foot stone. This was the first time in which the *Pietà* iconography had been introduced into Italy in terms of sculpture, and Michelangelo was

quick to execute a larger than life and youthful Virgin Mary cradling the heroized and muscular body of her son. This new way of interpreting the *Pietà* as an iconography shaped the way in which future artists would depict and receive the image in art history. An iconography that was once brutalized and horrific became an image of the perfection of art, while still reflecting a deeper meaning of strength and allegiance to the French, as well as a unique artistically sculpted masterpiece.

Figures 10-14: *Details of Michelangelo's Pietà, Exact Marble Cast,* 68.5 in × 76.8; Vatican Museums; Photographs by Avery Richardson.

SECTION VI: CONTEMPORANEOUS RECEPTIONS OF THE VATICAN *PIETÀ*: CONCLUSION AND REDEFINITION

The reception of the *Pietà* in contemporaneous society of the sixteenth century is extremely significant to the story of the sculpture. To open the conclusion of this thesis, it is important to begin with a story of Michelangelo in the first few days after the unveiling of the *Pietà* in Rome, which at the time adorned the Cardinal's burial site in Saint Petronilla Chapel, as it was intended to be. Vasari tells a story of how those who viewed the sculpture could not recognize the hand of the artist, and were accrediting it to someone else; Cristoforo Solari, who often depicted muscular Christs in marble. This angered Michelangelo, as this work was to be the key defining point in his career as a sculptor. Therefore, he found the need to carve his name into her sash, which is written in an account by Vasari, who interviewed Michelangelo. Vasari writes that "one day, Michelangelo, entering where it is placed, found a great number of foreigners from Lombardy, who praised it highly, one of whom asked of them who had made it; he answered, "Our Hunchback from Milan." Michelangelo remained silent, and when it seemed strange to him that his labors were attributed to someone else, one night he entered with a little light, having brought his chisels, he carved his name there."[119]

The signature, chiseled boldly into the sash of the Virgin Mary, is the only signature Michelangelo would ever produce on his sculptures. The lettering reads "MICHAEL ANGELVS," which is Latin for Michel Angel. Michelangelo in this way was seeing himself as one of the great masters of the ancient world, who would carve their names into their work in Latin. After the inscription of Michelangelo's name reads "FACIEBAT," meaning "he made it," referring to Michelangelo himself creating the work of art. The lettering inscription is in the past tense, just as

[119] Paolucci, *La Pietà di San Pietro*, 53-55.

Pliny the Elder, a writer of the antique described artists signing their work. In this way, Michelangelo further turned this Christian iconography into a token of the antique, and took ownership of the sculpture, so no other artist could claim his fame.[120] This story begins with the afterlife of the *Pietà*; the moments after its creation, and after the death of Jean Bilhères.

Unfortunately, apart from this story there is not a lot of evidence of contemporaneous audiences interacting with the work while it was in Saint Petronilla. Therefore, to study how this work of art was transformed in terms of its interpretations, we must look at the records of how Michelangelo's *Pietà* was utilized by generations to come, as well as the contemporaneous depictions of *Pietà* sculptures by artists after its unveiling. Though the *Pietà*'s intended meaning for the Cardinal was to serve as a funerary monument that demonstrated his political affiliations to the French monarchy, as well as his extensive religious faith steeped in French Benedictine tradition, this meaning further transformed as the decades progressed. Future Popes began to utilize and copy upon the sculpture as a piece of artwork, which they often used as part of the worship practices of the Catholic Church.

The statue only remained in Saint Petronilla for around two decades in its original spot. Saint Petronilla Chapel was eventually demolished in 1519 with the construction of the new Saint Peter's Basilica, as we know it today. The sculpture was deliberately removed from the gravesite of the Cardinal, and became further distanced from the public being able to interact with the work.[121] After all, the sculpture should have been a way for visitors of the chapel to offer prayers to the Cardinal after his death, just as several members of the French monarchy had often commissioned works like these to pray for the royal family. The *Pietà* moved to several other locations during this reconstruction, including the Secretonum in the old basilica as demolition

[120] Zöllner and Thoenes, *The Complete Works*, 34.
[121] Fenichel, "Patronage, Liturgy, and Mourning": 868.

began, and then it was moved to the Choir of Sixtus IV in 1568.[122] Within this setting, the *Pietà* became completely removed from its function as a funerary monument, and gained a new life as an object of spontaneous devotion, becoming one of the most admired images within Rome.[123]

The Choir of Sixtus IV was eventually demolished with the rest of the old Saint Peters, and from there the *Pietà* would move to several locations until finding its final resting place in 1749 within the Chapel of the Crucifix in the side nave of the new Basilica, where it remains today. Today, the sculpture has been raised upon a heightened base, sculpted by the Baroque artist Francesco Borromini in 1626, further removing it from the concept of a *Pietà* being a work in which the public could physically interact with. In 1637, Michelangelo's *Pietà* was officially declared as a holy image of the church in a coronation by the Chapter of Saint Peter's.[124]

In the mid to late eighteenth century, Europe underwent a lot of changes in terms of religious and political background, as Pope Benedict XIV shifted the energies of the people in the church. In these ideas, Benedict was passionate about revitalizing the worshipping of the Virgin Mary and saw the Mother of Christ as a way to appeal to the faithful.[125] Lisa Rafanelli says in *Michelangelo's Vatican Pietà and Its Afterlives* that "Michelangelo's Pietà was moved to a chapel in the main nave of the basilica. There, it was no longer central to the daily rituals of the College

[122] Paolucci, *La Pietà di San Pietro*, 56-57.
[123] In 1568, Michelangelo's *Pietà* was adorned with a golden crown on the head of the Virgin, and Benvenuto Cellini was commissioned to construct a brass cross to be put behind the sculpture's display. Later, the *Pietà* was adorned with two eighteenth century bronze angels, who were added to appear as if they were placing the crown upon the head of the Virgin. The original cross by Cellini was replaced with a marble one that complimented the walls of the new basilica that surrounded the *Pietà*. In 1927, the *Pietà* became only juxtaposed with the marble cross behind the sculpture, the angels being removed, which is how it is displayed today. Regarding the evolution of the sculpture's display, see Paolucci in Ibid., 58-59; 69-71.
[124] Grażyna Jurkowlaniec, "Masterpieces, Altarpieces, and Devotional Prints: Close and Distant Encounters with Michelangelo's Vatican Pietà." *Religions* 10, no. 5 (2019), 309: 1.
[125] Lisa M. Rafanelli and Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Michelangelo's Vatican Pietà and Its Afterlives*. New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2023, 79.

of Canons but functioned as a reassuring and welcoming symbol of the love of the Mother Church."[126]

To further distance the work from the public, the *Pietà* now sits behind a thick shield of glass, mainly due to a Hungarian man named László Tóth taking a hammer to the Virgin's precious body in 1972 in an act of vandalism.[127] Now, it appears she is clearly redefined not only from those of the North through her intended politically, religiously, and stylistically charged meaning, but has now been completely redefined from the purpose that Jean Bilhères and Michelangelo intended for her, as being a sculpture in which to pray for the deceased Cardinal of France. She is now viewed solely as a piece of sacred artwork for the basilica and has become one of the most widely copied upon artworks in all the Italian Renaissance.

The idea that Michelangelo's sculpture, inspired by Jean's patronage, has reimagined the iconography of the *Pietà* is not only visible in the physical manifestation and religious context of the finished sculpture, but it is also visible in the life of the image outside of Saint Peter's. Since its contemporaneous reception, the Vatican *Pietà* has been widely imitated and copied upon. The image began to appear in engravings, etchings, sketches, and studies all over Europe as artists studied the works of Michelangelo, and as the Catholic Church further capitalized on the image. For instance, in 1546, Francis the I of France was so fond of the sculpture, that he requested an exact molded cast to be created for the Palace of Fontainebleau (now lost). This example is perhaps one of the earliest exact copies to exist of the Vatican *Pietà*, and it is ironic that it should have found its way back to France, considering the very French aspects of the Cardinal's commission.

[126] Ibid., 79.
[127] Paolucci, *La Pietà di San Pietro*, 15.

Other examples include two exact copies of the sculpture in bronze commissioned in 1616 for high-profile patrons in Italy and Spain, including the Strozzi family.[128]

However, not every image of Michelangelo's *Pietà* produced after its creation was a direct cast or copy of the work, as we see on modern day altars or in Catholic gift shops. In fact, artists of Italy in Michelangelo's time still depicted *Pietàs* in their own unique styles, but at the same time appear to be adhering to the imitations of Michelangelo's style and design, steeped in Florentine tradition and Classicism. Ironically, it would take an entire other thesis to properly catalog all the numerous ways in which this iconography has been depicted post-Michelangelo.

Sebastiano del Piombo's version, for example, which was painted just seventeen years after Michelangelo, for Giovani Botonti, for his family chapel in Viterbo, is a great visualization of how artists were inspired by Michelangelo yet found their own aesthetics in the redefined image. **(Figure 15)** Like Bilhères as a patron, Botonti was interested in the people of Viterbo's interest in Augustinian and Benedictine theology, in which Mary was utilized as a focal point between the human and the divine.[129] There is evidence, due to Michelangelo's close relationship with Sebastiano del Piombo, in letters and drawings that suggests that Michelangelo most likely had a hand in the design of Sebastiano's *Pietà*, further suggesting that Michelangelo was the looked-to artist when it came to this iconography after 1499. **(Figure 16)** This example is just one of hundreds of images created during the Italian Renaissance that demonstrates the studying of designs of Michelangelo for this type of devotional image. This image demonstrates the distancing of the brutality of the *Pietà* iconography and instead looks to a more monumentally draped Virgin Mary with a less emaciated Christ, after Michelangelo.

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[128] Rafanelli and Buonarroti, *Pietà and Its Afterlives*, 67-69.

[129] Marsha Libina, "Picturing Time and Eternity in Sebastiano Del Piombo's Viterbo Pietà," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 51, n. 2, (January 1, 2020): 407-414.

Grażyna Jurkowlaniec argues in "Masterpieces, Altarpieces, and Devotional Prints: Close and Distant Encounters with Michelangelo's Vatican Pietà" that "this combination of aesthetic and religious motivations, on the one hand, and the intersection of the public and the domestic spheres, on the other hand, invite us to analyze the reception of Michelangelo's sculpture as a masterpiece, as an altarpiece, and also as a model for devotional images."[130] It seems as if the sculpture was given an entirely new life after its creation. While the Cardinal and Michelangelo's interaction created a new version of the representation of the *Pietà*, it was this version in which contemporaries of Michelangelo would utilize in a religious and aesthetic context. No longer was the *Pietà* just a Northern iconography, but rather it was given a new life by the artist and patron, and its beauty was utilized in the centuries to come as a devotional image of the church, and an image in which artists could use to obtain the mastery of the style of Michelangelo.

In the nineteenth century, Italy began to undergo a sense of cultural change, moving towards a nationalism that turned Michelangelo into a proud part of their heritage. It was in this time that the culture of Italy mixed with the devotion of the Catholic faith began to see a mass production in plaster casts of Michelangelo's *Pietà*.[131] This mass reproduction and capitalization of the *Pietà* as being a significant work of Michelangelo and a religious image of Saint Peter's Basilica is how it is known today.

However, it is not these contemporaneous depictions, nor the afterlives of the *Pietà* to which this thesis is concerned with. Rather, it is the moments leading up to its creation that is what is deemed most significant. Had the Vatican *Pietà* not been depicted in the way it was, we would not even have an argument for the case of reinterpretation of the meaning in art history. These contemporaneous depictions and receptions are just a further aftermath of the larger picture, in

[130] Jurkowlaniec, "Masterpieces, Altarpieces, and Devotional Prints": 3.
[131] Rafanelli and Buonarroti, *Pietà and Its Afterlives*, 80.

which it was Jean Bilhères and Michelangelo- the significant relationship between an artist and his patron- that truly set the tone for this iconography at the turn of the sixteenth century.

When reflecting on the final masterpiece that was created between the artist and its patron, it is unfortunate that Michelangelo's *Pietà* is so far removed from Jean Bilhères' original intention. In terms of the sculpture's execution, the Cardinal would have been extremely happy with the image, as it is sculpted exactly as requested, with a monumental Virgin in marble cradling the body of her dead son. However, as the image has further shifted in meaning overtime, and now that it is completely removed from his grave, the Cardinal is not being properly honored. The *Pietà* is more than just a devotional public image- it is a French tomb, meant to honor the body of someone who has been ignored and lost to time. This is why this thesis is so significant. Jean Bilhères' name deserves to be placed back into the spotlight as not just a patron of a work of art, but as someone who represented his country and wanted to be respected and remembered in his death. He deserves to be honored beyond what the new basilica allows, with its distantly removed display from the public, and the Cardinal's tombstone now tucked away in the crypt of the basilica and not even within proximity of the *Pietà*. In the end, it cannot be ignored that the story of the relationship of Michelangelo Buonarroti and Jean Bilhères is extremely significant to our understanding of how the work came to be, and how it created a chain reaction of the way in which *Pietàs* were received and depicted in art.

This sculpture was intended for the mourning of Cardinal Lagraulas, and a continuity of prayers in his afterlife in Saint Petronilla. Fenichel writes that "the *Pietà,* like similar sculptures in French funerary chapels, would have reminded the assembled mourners and the paid chaplains of their intercessory role in praying on behalf of the cardinal, muted by death".[132] This quote offers a

[132] Fenichel, "Patronage, Liturgy, and Mourning": 855.

significant study of the interplay between Jean Bilhères' French political background, as well as his religious one, helping provide evidence of the significance of the decision of a *Pietà* for his tomb. By having a tomb that was physically connected to Saint Peter's as well as being within the chapel of the French monarch, there is clearly a continuous theme of representing his heritage, position as a Cardinal, and the political balance of France. Little did Jean Bilhères know that his tomb sculpture would become one of the most significant sculptures of the Italian Renaissance.[133]

Figure 15: Sebastiano del Piombo. *Virgin Mourning the Dead Christ (Pietà; Lamentation over Dead Christ)*. 1517-18. Oil on canvas, 270 x 225 cm. Viterbo (Italy). Museo Civico.

Figure 16: Sebastiano del Piombo (after partial designs by Michelangelo), *Lamentation over the dead Christ*, early 16th century, oil on poplar, 248 x 190 x 13 cm, Museo Civico di Viterbo.

[133] Ibid., 869-870.

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Pietà; Flanders 1600/1700 (XVlle siècle); haut-relief sculpture, alabaster; 0.34m x 0.27m; Louvre Collections, Not on View. https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010092604.

Pietà; early 15th century German; sculpture, alabaster; 13 x 11 inches; The Cloisters Not On View https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/472303.

Pietà (Vesperbild); 1375-1400 German (Rhineland); sculpture wood, poplar, plaster, paint, gilt; 52 ¼ x 27 ⅜ x 14 ½ inches; on view at The MET Cloisters Gallery 16 https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/470603.

Pietà; 1435-1440 Germany; sculptural, wood, paint, and gilt; 35 x 38 x 17 inches; The Cloisters Not On View https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/471921.

Pietà ; 1476 Italian by Carlo Crivelli; painting, tempera on wood, gold ground; 28 ¼ x 25 ⅜ inches; on view at the MET Fifth Avenue Gallery 62 https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436053.

Pietà (Lamentation); early 16th century French; sculpture, wood, paint and gilding; 63 ¾ x 55 3/16 inches; On view at the MET Fifth Avenue Gallery 306 https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/462776.

Pietà; second quarter 16th century Spanish; sculpture, Alabaster, with traces of original polychromy; 39x59 inches; on view at the MET Fifth Avenue Gallery 535 https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/197459.

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