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FRANCESCO FURINI
(Florence c. 1600 – 1646)

SAINT BARTHOLOMEW

Oil on canvas
127 x 96 cm; 50 x 37 3/4 in.

Provenance

Milan, private collection since the 1980s;
Sale, Milan, Il Ponte casa d'Aste, 27 March 2024, lot 295 (as 'Follower of Jusepe de Ribera').

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We are thankful to Dr. Massimo Pulini for having drafted the following detailed study on this previously unpublished Saint Bartholomew by Francesco Furini. We are also grateful to Dr. Francesca Baldassarri for having independently confirmed the attribution.

Proportioned to life size and set within the format then referred to as a *tela imperatore*, the painting depicts a virile figure seen from behind. Although his hairline is receding, he wears a thick head of hair falling in large locks at the nape of his neck, together with a broad grey beard. This beard starts high and remains dark just below the cheekbone, yet grows whiter down towards the jaw.

Turning his face towards the viewer by tilting his head over his right shoulder, he presents an intense gaze, tinged with melancholy. His entire body, down to the knees, is draped in a red cloth, skilfully arranged to form broad folds that rest on the protrusions of his physique and tuck into its recesses, emphasising a proud, upright torso. Among the folds of the cloth that cascade and rise again, the brisk yet careful brushwork reveals a darker ground, using strokes that shape light and shadow as if depicting a mountainous landscape. Along the edges of this mantle and at neck level, a moss-green garment emerges, which also appears at the wrist of his right hand. In his right fist, he raises a knife; with his left hand, he firmly grasps the spine of a large, bound book, which seems to rest upon his thigh. Although in shadow, one can discern the buckle that clasps the volume with a metal catch.

The blade and the sacred text are precisely the attributes of Saint Bartholomew, the Apostle from Cana who suffered the most horrific martyrdom among the disciples of Jesus, having been flayed alive. The figure's melancholy air, supported by an underlying dignity, discreetly suggests that tragic fate which likens him to Marsyas.

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The composition of the painting, focusing on a single figure set against a dark, closely confined background, aligns it with the classic iconographic type of a series of *Apostles*, such as those often hung in the chapter houses of cathedrals. Many artists of the early seventeenth century tackled this subject, producing sets of twelve vertical canvases (or sometimes fourteen when Saint Paul and the Blessing Christ were added to the Apostles).

Especially within the Caravaggesque sphere, one finds series that, like this canvas, concentrate on depicting the protagonists in half-light, distilling the spiritual narrative into a face, two hands, a drapery, and at most a couple of objects that recall the subject's life and death. One could say that this iconographic formula was popularised by the Spaniard-turned-Italian Jusepe de Ribera (Xàtiva 1591 – Naples 1652), which explains why in the past this work was attributed to his circle. However, the painting - together with the refined style that informs it - should be rightfully credited to the Florentine artist Francesco Furini. A leading figure of Tuscan artistic culture and a chief exponent of the so-called *linea morbida* ('soft style') of Florentine painting in the seventeenth century, Furini also underwent formative training in Rome, in the pivotal workshop of Bartolomeo Manfredi (Ostiano 1582 – Rome 1622), who is regarded as the true disseminator of Caravaggism across Europe.

Several *Apostles* painted by Francesco Furini are known, and in particular two of these - a *Saint Peter* (kept in Florence at the Cenacolo Museum, Fig. 1) and a *Saint Andrew* (now in storage at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Carrara, Fig. 2) - share the same composition, dimensions, and style as the work under discussion. They differ by only a few centimetres on each side, and I propose that they formed once part of the same commission.

Two different canvases of *Saint John the Evangelist* have also come to light: one has long been known, housed at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyon (Fig. 3), whereas another, more recently attributed, appeared at the Pandolfini auction house in Florence (Fig. 4). In both these cases, the dimensions are comparable, though the

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second *Saint John the Evangelist*, despite its poorer state of conservation, is perhaps more likely to have been part of the series currently being reconstructed. The best clue is the vertical section of wall visible before the apostle's torso, which appears in reverse in the *Saint Bartholomew* under consideration - a minimal device to transform an otherwise abstract background into a tangible wall.

Our bearded saint possesses physical characteristics that recur in numerous works by Furini, and we can even identify the name of the model whom the artist selected as an aesthetic ideal for masculine subjects. Furini was also a poet, writing a playful poem entitled "Alla barba", expressly dedicated to his most frequent sitter, the blacksmith Pietro Zaballi, who had shaved off "the jaws of their venerable ancient beard."¹

The facial features of *Saint Bartholomew*, as well as those of *Saint Andrew* (Fig. 1), *Saint Peter* (Fig. 2), or *Saint Michael and Saint Benedict* (Fig. 6) in the Church of the Badia Fiorentina, can be traced to different interpretations of the same individual, marked by hollow cheeks and a beard starting just below the protrusion of the cheekbones. These elements also appear in a fine drawing at the Metropolitan Museum of New York (Fig. 5), a *Study of a Sleeping Man* resting his head on his arm (possibly a portrait of Pietro Zaballi).

Turning slightly towards the viewer and offering a shoulder as the figure's prow likewise corresponds precisely to Furini's creative and pictorial approach. I believe he derived this mannerism from the *sacre conversazioni* in Tuscan Renaissance altarpieces, where saints are arranged in a semicircle, open towards the foreground. Isolating a single figure with this pose in the seventeenth century lends it varying conceptual nuances. By engaging the audience directly - from the painting's 'stage' to the viewer - this device acts explicitly on a theatrical level, while at the same time striving for emotional intimacy in the portrayal.

¹ See G. Gargani, *Commentario della famiglia Furini*, Florence 1876, pp. 31–45.

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Regarding the origin of this series of *Apostles*, it should be noted that the two canvases depicting Saint Peter and Saint Andrew come from the *Confraternita del Nicchio* in Florence, which was dedicated to the Apostle James. It was Roberto Longhi who set aside the earlier attribution to Passignano in favour of a decisive attribution to Furini, also noting an affinity with Furini's depiction of Plato in the frescoes of the Sala degli Argenti in the Palazzo Pitti. Unfortunately, the Confraternity's archives offer no firm chronological anchors for dating the series. Yet the stylistic evidence alone suggests that these paintings belong to Furini's early Roman period in Manfredi's studio. I therefore consider it appropriate to place the present Saint Bartholomew in the 1620s or in the early years of the following decade.

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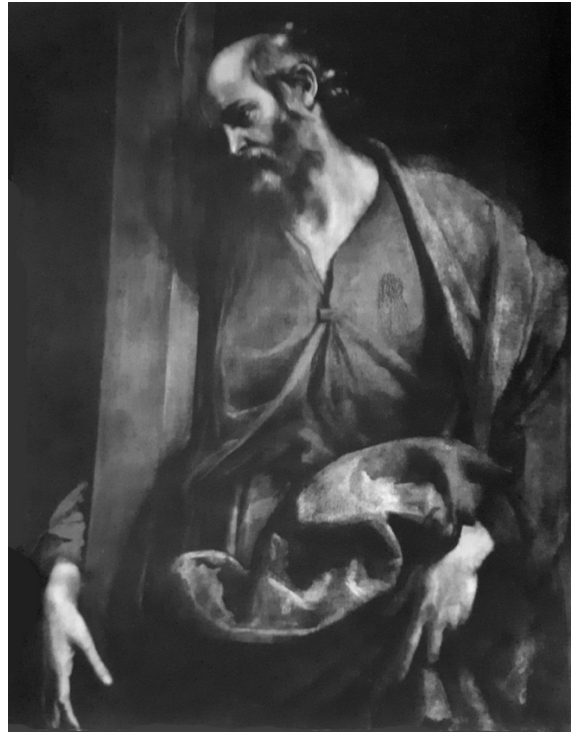
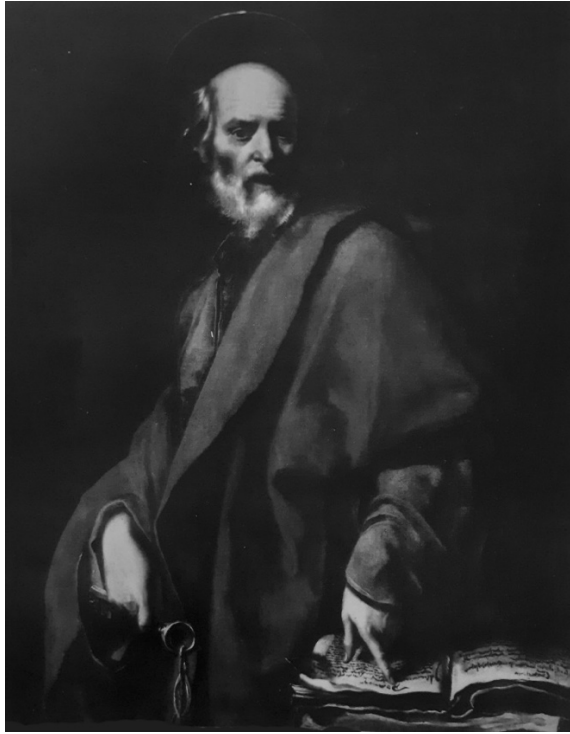


Fig. 1. Francesco Furini, *Saint Peter*, oil on canvas, 131 × 104 cm. Florence, Gallerie Fiorentine storerooms at the Cenacolo Museum.

Fig. 2. Francesco Furini, *Saint Andrew*, oil on canvas, 131 × 105 cm. Gallerie Fiorentine storerooms at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Carrara.

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Fig. 3. Francesco Furini, *Saint John the Evangelist*, oil on canvas, 125 × 103 cm. Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts.

Fig. 4. Francesco Furini, *Saint John the Evangelist*, oil on canvas, 116 × 90 cm. Formerly Florence, Pandolfini, 29 September 2020.

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Fig. 5. Francesco Furini, *Study of a Sleeping Man (Portrait of Pietro Zaballi?)*. Red chalk, highlighted with white chalk, 24.3 x 19.4 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum.

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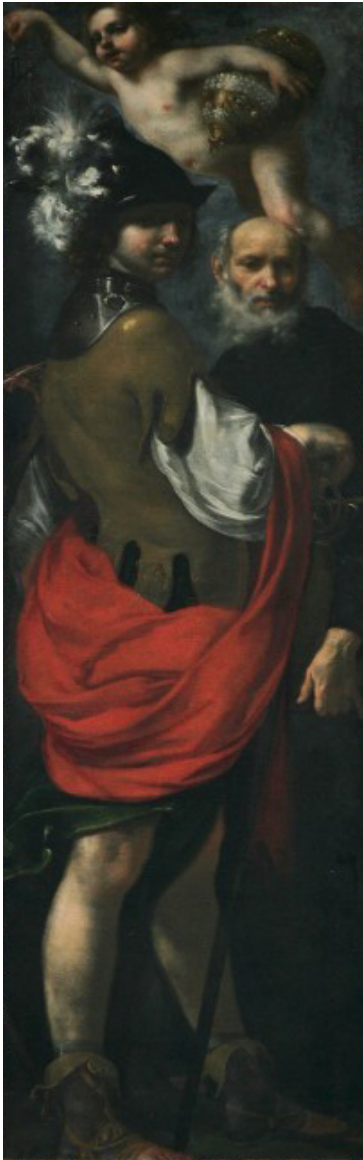


Fig. 6. Francesco Furini, *Saint Michael and Saint Benedict*. Florence, Church of the Badia Fiorentina.

Fig. 7. Francesco Furini, *Judith, the Maidservant, and the Head of Holofernes*, oil on canvas, 124.5 x 95 cm. Formerly London, South Kensington, Christie's, 28 April 2016.