

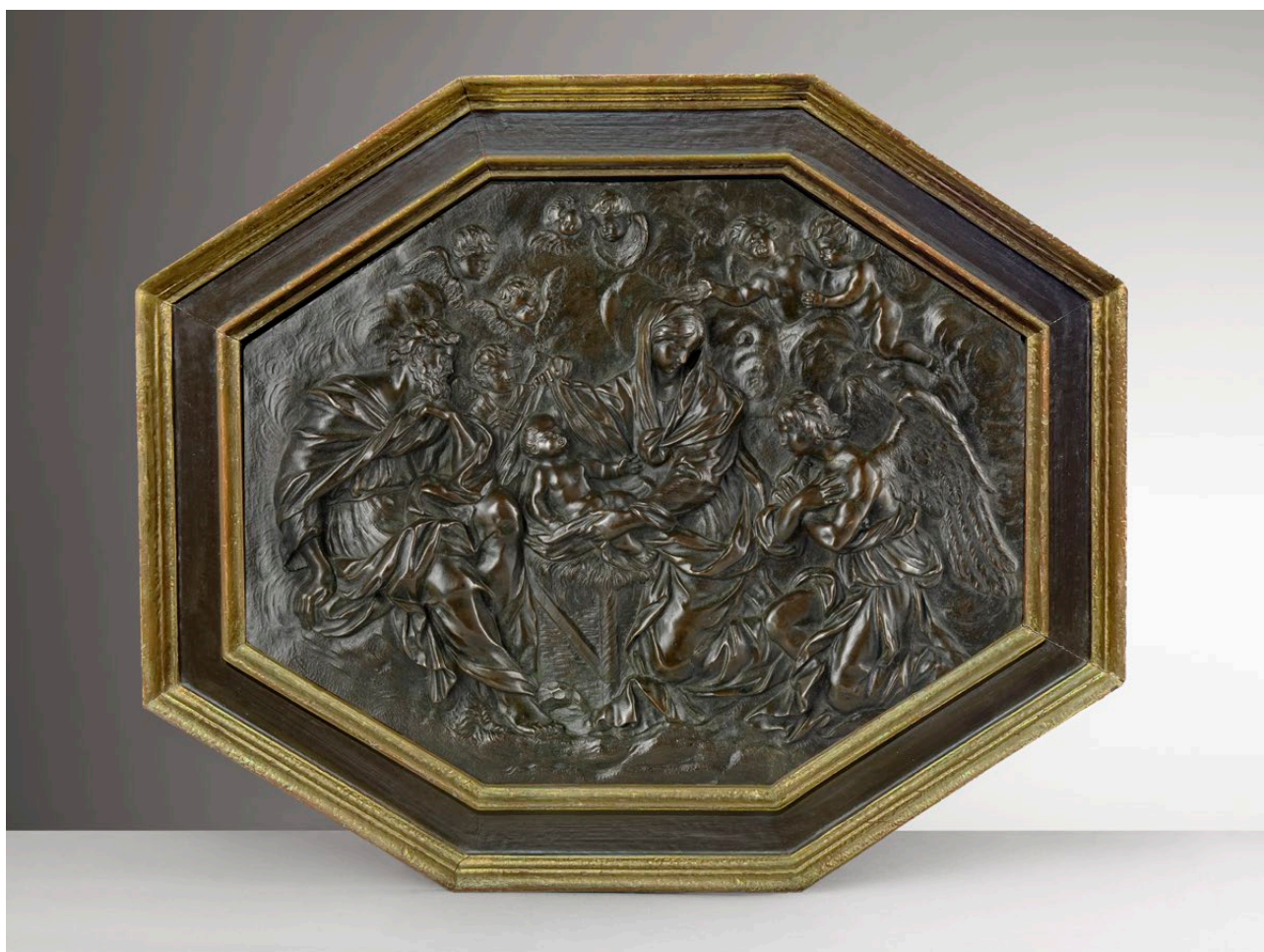
walterpadovani.

Antonio Giorgetti
Nativity









Antonio Giorgetti (Rome, documented 1657–1669)

Nativity, c. 1662

Bronze relief; 43 × 32 cm

PROVENANCE: Italy, private collection.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Jennifer Montagu, *Antonio and Giuseppe Giorgetti: Sculptors to Cardinal Francesco Barberini*, in «The Art Bulletin», LII, 3, 1970, pp. 278–298: 297–298.

The relief depicts the *Nativity of Christ*, who occupies the centre of the scene, lying upon a straw pallet beside the Virgin Mary. The two principal figures, placed at the heart of the composition, are flanked by Saint Joseph on the left—shown in profile and absorbed in contemplative meditation—and by a praying angel on the right, kneeling in adoration before the

Child. In the background, a choir of jubilant cherubs emerges from billowing clouds, participating in the celebration of Christ's birth (fig. 1).

This composition was first brought to scholarly attention in 1970 by Jennifer Montagu, who with pioneering insight attributed the work to the sculptor Antonio Giorgetti.¹ The artist, son of the woodcarver Giovanni Maria Giorgetti and

¹ Jennifer Montagu, *Antonio and Giuseppe Giorgetti: Sculptors to Cardinal Francesco Barberini*, in «The Art Bulletin», LII, 3, 1970, pp. 278–298: esp. pp. 297–298.

¹ Antonio Giorgetti, *Nativity*, c. 1662.



brother of the sculptor Giuseppe, is today rightly counted among the leading supporting figures of Roman sculpture in the second half of the seventeenth century, an heir to that classicist tradition of the Baroque rooted in the legacy of Alessandro Algardi.² Little biographical information survives concerning Antonio. He was in all likelihood born in Rome, where he is securely documented from 1657–58 onwards. At that time, he completed the two kneeling *Angels holding a drapery* that form a balustrade before the Spada Chapel in San Girolamo della Carità (*figs. 2, 2bis*).³ In addition to these statues, Giorgetti's major undertakings include the execution of the monumental *Iconostasis* of the Abbey of Santa Maria at Grottaferrata, carried out between 1660 and 1665 (*fig. 3*), and the masterpiece of his late ca-

2. Antonio Giorgetti, *Angels Holding a Drapery*.
Rome, San Girolamo della Carità, Spada Chapel.

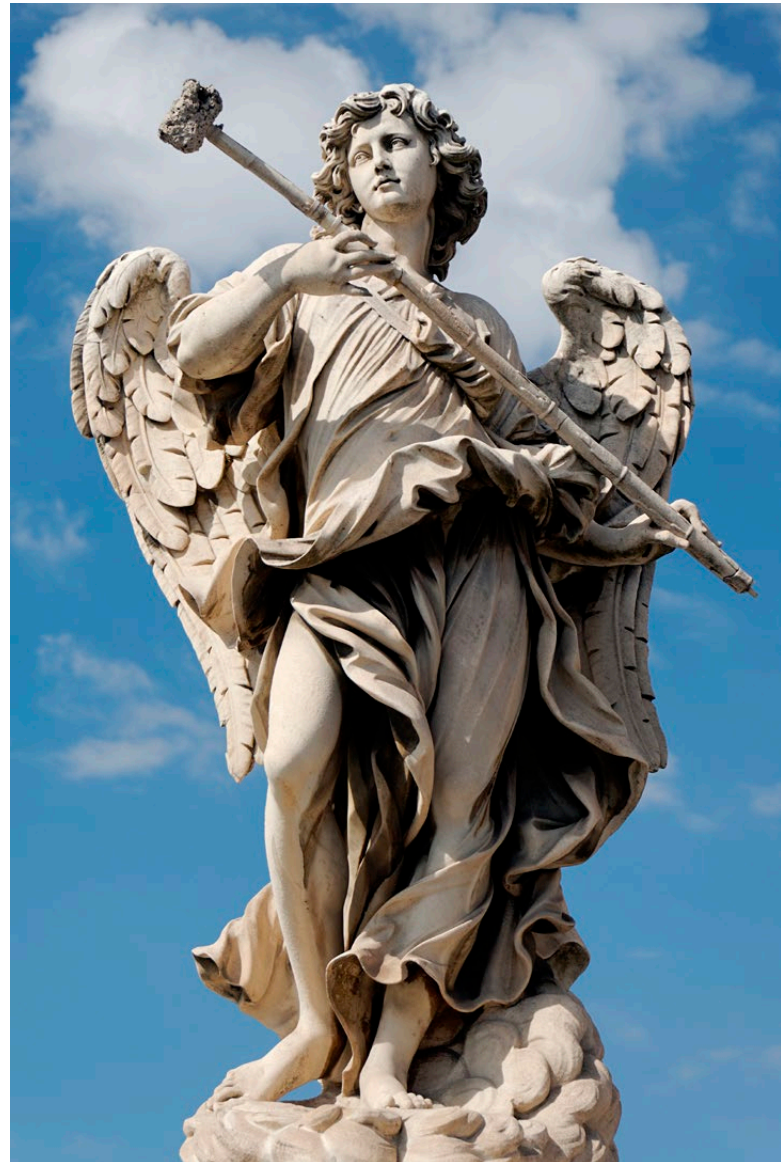


² More recently, on Antonio Giorgetti and the sculptor's family, see the biographical entry by Maria Cristina Basini, *Giorgetti, Antonio*, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, LV, Rome 2001, consulted online.

³ For the Spada Chapel in San Girolamo della Carità and Giorgetti's works, see Oreste Ferrari, Serenita Papaldo, *Le sculture del Seicento a Roma*, Rome 1999, pp. 156–157 (and previous bibliography).



3. Antonio Giorgetti, *Iconostasis with Angels and Crown-Bearing Putti*. Grottaferrata, Abbey of Santa Maria.



4. Antonio Giorgetti, *Angel with the Sponge*. Rome, Ponte di Castel Sant'Angelo.

reer, the *Angel with the Sponge* on the bridge of Castel Sant'Angelo (fig. 4).⁴ This imposing statue, completed in 1668, marks the culmination of Giorgetti's career; the artist died shortly thereafter, on 24 December 1669. Though brief, his artistic path—especially during the 1660s—was shaped by a close association with Cardinal Francesco Barberini, who on several occasions entrusted both

Antonio and his brother Giuseppe with a wide range of commissions (fig. 5).⁵

Montagu connected the invention of the *Nativity* precisely to the patronage of the cardinal. In 1662, while in Barberini's service, Giorgetti paid the *pietre dure* cutter Adone Capozio for lapis lazuli inserts intended to embellish the octagonal frame of a *Nativity*—perhaps executed in

⁴ Montagu 1970, cited in note 1, pp. 283–285; for the *Angel with the Sponge*: Ferrari, Papaldo 1999, cited in note 3, p. 460.

⁵ On this subject, see again Montagu 1970, cited in note 1, *passim*, and Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, *Seventeenth-Century Barberini Documents and Inventories of Art*, 2 vols, New York 1975, pp. 1, 12, 18, 36, 334, 336, 352.



silver—made by Michele Sprinati after a model supplied by the sculptor.⁶ Although this precious Barberini commission must now be considered lost, it is highly plausible that the execution of the present octagonal bronze relief is likewise connected to that undertaking. The work survives alongside a small group of closely related casts.⁷ Among these, particular mention should be made of a gilded bronze in an English private collection (*fig. 6*), which bears on the reverse the pseudo-signature “IL GIORGIETI,” cold-incised into the metal. The nature of the inscription, together with its incorrect spelling, renders it almost certainly apocryphal; nevertheless, it remains significant in reinforcing the attribution of the *Nativity* to Giorgetti.⁸

To the reliefs already noted must be added further examples: one now in the Museum of Art of the Rhode Island School of Design (*fig. 7*);⁹ another in a private collection, formerly on the London art market (*fig. 8*);¹⁰ one formerly in the New York collection of the dealer Raphael Stora (*fig. 9*).¹¹ In addition, at least two eighteenth-century casts of the same model are known: one, tentatively attributed to Antonio Bonazza, is preserved in the Musei Civici of Padua,¹² while another, of French provenance and tentatively attributed to François Girardon, is now housed

5. Lorenzo Ottoni, *Portrait of Francesco Barberini*.
Rome, Gallerie Nazionali d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini.

6 Montagu 1970, cited in note 1, p. 280, note 190 (for the document); see also *Ead.*, *Gold, Silver and Bronze. Metal Sculpture of the Roman Baroque*, New Haven and London 1996, pp. 5–6.

7 For a census of the known specimen, see Montagu 1970, cited in note 1, p. 298, note 154.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 153 and note 157.

9 The cast in the Museum of Art of the Rhode Island School of Design was sold to the museum in 1963 by the Turin gallery of Pietro Accorsi. Museum documentation, kindly shared by Maureen O'Brien, whom I thank here, clarifies that at the time of acquisition the relief was considered a work by Ercole Ferrata (letters between Stephen Ostrow and Jennifer Montagu, 5, 12 and 19 December 1969).

10 *European Sculpture and Works of Art*, auction catalogue, Sotheby's, London, 21 April 1994, p. 36, lot 71; to this specimen should be added a similar cast, of inferior quality in terms of finish, which appeared more recently on the art market (cf. *French and Continental Furniture, Works of Art, Tapestries and Carpets*, auction catalogue, Christie's, New York, 20 March 1999, p. 25, lot 29).

11 Montagu 1970, cited in note 1, p. 298, note 154.

12 *Ibid.*



6. Antonio Giorgetti, *Nativity*. London, private collection.



7. Antonio Giorgetti, *Nativity*. Rhode Island, Museum of Art and School of Design.



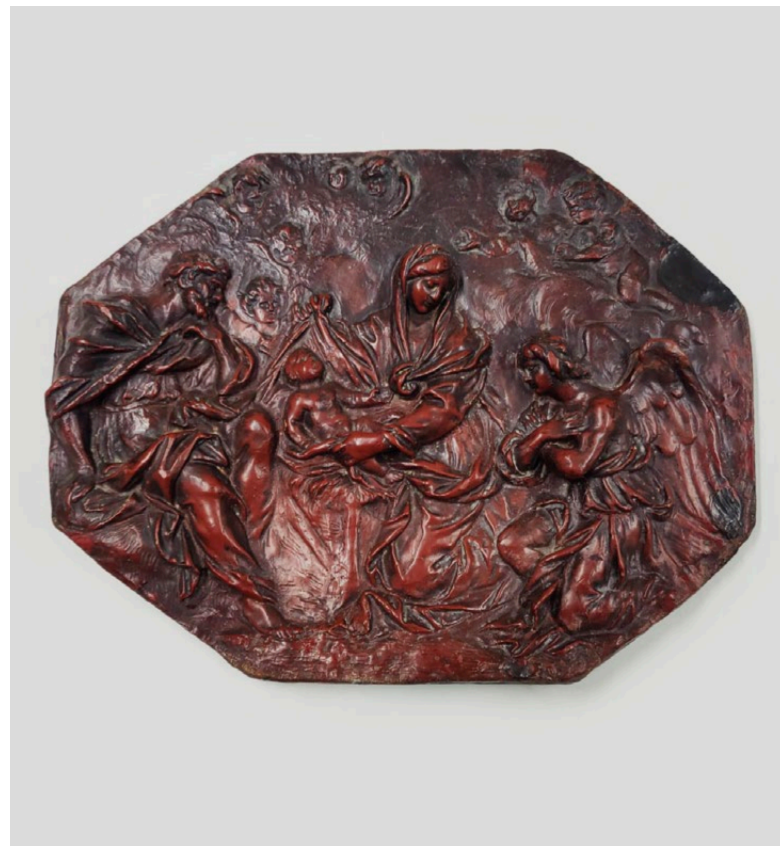
9. Antonio Giorgetti, *Nativity*. Formerly New York, Raphael Stora collection.



8. Antonio Giorgetti, *Nativity*. Private collection.



10. Antonio Giorgetti, *Nativity*.
Formerly Milan, Galleria Longari.



11. Antonio Giorgetti, *Nativity*. Valletta,
MUZA - Malta National Community Art Museum.

in the church of Saint-Urbain in Troyes.¹³ Beyond the metal casts, two wax models are also known: one formerly in the Galleria Longari in Milan (*fig. 10*)¹⁴ and another in the collections of the National Museum of Malta (*fig. 11*).¹⁵

The attribution of the *Nativity* rests above all on a series of stylistic comparisons already proposed by Montagu. Particularly compelling is the comparison between the praying angel and the monumental figures executed for the Spada Chapel, or even more closely those placed on the iconostasis of Grottaferrata's Abbey (*figs. 12, 13*).

Likewise, the construction of the drapery in the *Nativity*—especially that of the Virgin—finds a close parallel in the fluttering garments of the figures appearing in the bronze tondo representing the *Allegory of Erudition* (*fig. 14*). This relief, now in the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples, was originally part of the decoration of the *Funerary monument to Lucas Holstenius*, partially dismantled in 1832 but still preserved in the Roman church of Santa Maria dell'Anima, where it was erected in 1663.¹⁶

In both style and composition, the *Nativity* reveals Giorgetti's classicist sensibility. The scene

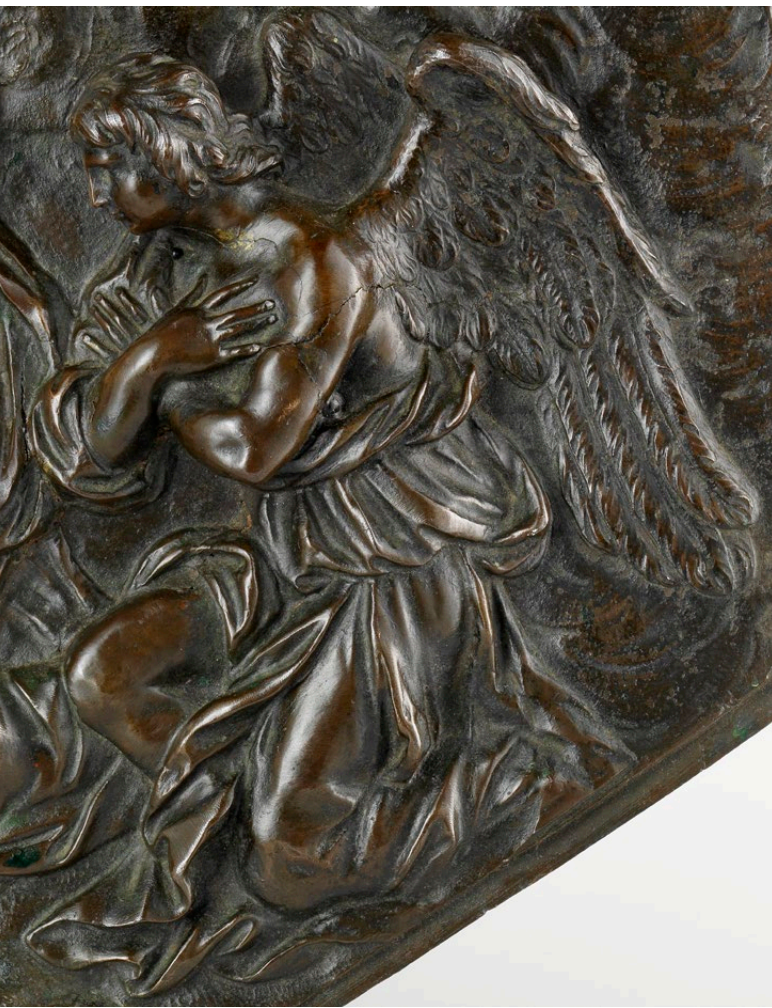
¹³ *Les trésors des églises de France*, exhibition catalogue (Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, 5 February – 26 April 1965), Paris 1965, p. 93, cat. 181; Montagu 1970, cited in note 1, p. 298, note 154.

¹⁴ For the wax formerly in the Longari Gallery, recently reappearing on the art market (Grosse Kunstauktion, auction catalogue, Hampel, Munich, 28 September 2017, p. 72, lot 71), see Alessandra Giannotti, in *Spunti per conversare*, ed. by Galleria Nella Longari, Milan 2005, pp. 34–37, cat. 9.

¹⁵ Montagu 1970, cited in note 1, p. 298, note 154. I thank the museum principal curator, Bernadine Scicluna, for sharing photographs of the work.

¹⁶ Ferrari, Papaldo 1999, cited in note 3, p. 211 (and previous bibliography).





12. Antonio Giorgetti, *Nativity* (detail), c. 1662.



13. Antonio Giorgetti, *Angel*. Grottaferrata, Abbey of Santa Maria, iconostasis.

is articulated through restrained postures and a measured rhythm, unmistakably indebted to Algardi. The influence of the Bolognese master emerges most clearly in the adoring angel, a figure repeatedly reworked, with variations, throughout Giorgetti's career, yet ultimately inspired by the earlier model sculpted by Algardi to accompany the statue of *Saint Filippo Neri* for Santa Maria della Vallicella (1635–40; **fig. 15**).¹⁷ More generally, both the composition of the *Nativity* and its octagonal contour recall several of Algardi's inventions, including the *Pietà* for-

merly in the Victor Spark collection (c. 1630; **fig. 16**), now in the Frick Collection in New York,¹⁸ and above all certain versions of the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (1635–36), such as the reliefs in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge (**fig. 17**).¹⁹

As Montagu observed, although Giorgetti was perfectly capable of conceiving complex sculptural inventions on his own—as demonstrated by the Baroque apparatus at Grottaferrata—he often collaborated during his career

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 378.

¹⁸ Jennifer Montagu, *Alessandro Algardi*, 2 vols, New Haven and London 1985, II, p. 342, cat. 31.C1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 307, cat. 4.C2; p. 308, cat. 4.C6.



with the most prominent painters active in Rome at the time, among them *Ciro Ferri*.²⁰ In the case of the present *Nativity*, it is plausible that the design of the project may have involved *Giovan Francesco Romanelli*, the Viterbo-born painter and pupil of *Pietro da Cortona*, who, like *Giorgetti*, had been in the service of Cardinal Barberini since the early 1630s. Specifically, the composition of the relief is closely related to *Romanelli*'s altarpiece of the *Adoration of the Shepherds*, painted around 1640 for the church of *Sant'Agostino* in *Siena*, from which *Giorgetti* directly borrowed the pose of the meditative *Saint Joseph* (figs. 18, 19, 20).²¹ From the *Sienese* painting also derive a number of small-format works, including a *Nativity* that appeared on the *Roman* art market in 2003 (figs. 21, 22), in which the *Virgin*, the *Child* and the kneeling angel are arranged in a composition almost identical to that of the present bronze

14. Antonio Giorgetti, *Allegory of Erudition*.
Naples, Museo di Capodimonte.

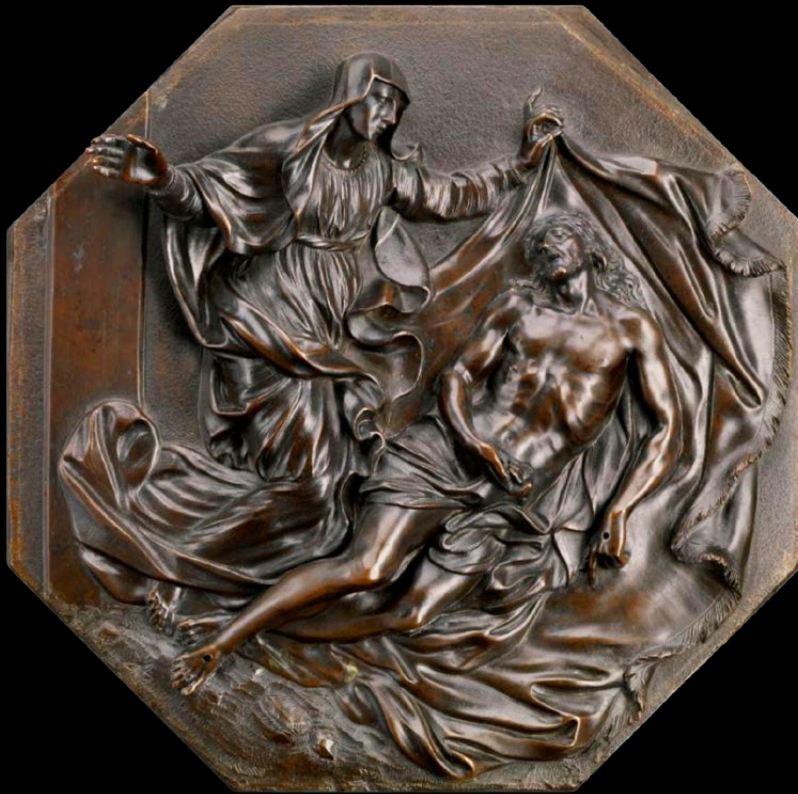
15. Alessandro Algardi, *Saint Filippo Neri and an Angel*.
Rome, Santa Maria della Vallicella.



²⁰ Montagu 1970, cited in note 3, p. 298.

²¹ *Ibid.* For a biographical summary of the painter, see Silvia Bruno, *Romanelli, Giovan Francesco*, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, LXXXVIII, Rome 2017.





16. Alessandro Algardi, *Pietà*. New York, The Frick Collection.

17. Alessandro Algardi, *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*. Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum.

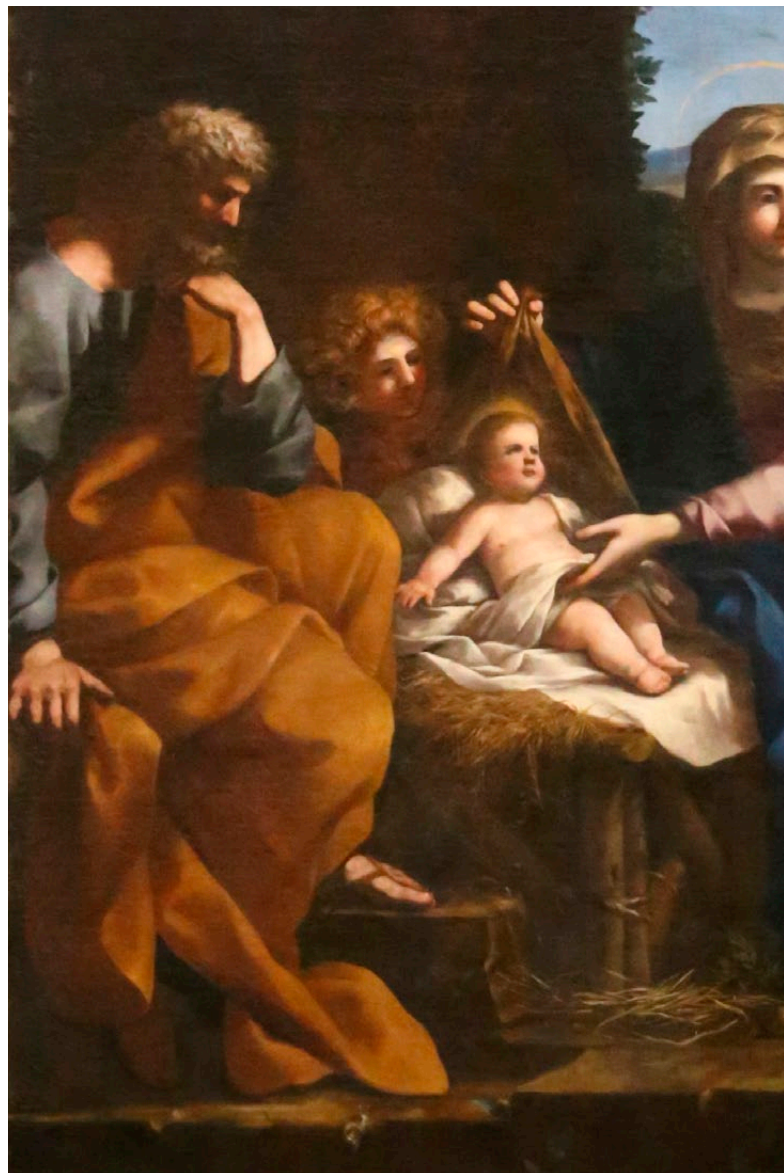




18. Giovan Francesco Romanelli, *Adoration of the Shepherds*. Siena, Sant'Agostino.



19. Antonio Giorgetti, *Nativity* (detail), c. 1662.



20. Giovan Francesco Romanelli, *Adoration of the Shepherds*. (detail) Siena, Sant'Agostino.

relief.²² Furthermore, as noted by Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, the Barberini collections included several *Nativities* or *Adorations* attributed to Romanelli, among them a striking octagonal version painted on lapis lazuli and presented as a diplomatic gift to the Spanish crown.²³

An additional observation may be added to the relationship between Giorgetti and Romanelli—one that has so far escaped scholarly

attention, yet suggests a broader involvement of the painter with the sculptor's family. Pietro Paolo Giorgetti, who died in Rome around 1655 and was in all likelihood Antonio's grandfather, had already collaborated with Romanelli. In 1640 he executed the monumental frame for the *Marriage of Peleus and Thetis*, a painting commissioned from Romanelli by Cardinal Barberini himself.²⁴

²² Montagu 1970, cited in note 3, p. 298.

²³ Reported by Jennifer Montagu to Walter Padovani (expert opinion dated 27 October 2005).

²⁴ Aronberg Lavin 1975, cited in note 5, p. 36, doc. 285.





21. Giovan Francesco Romanelli, *Nativity*. Private collection.



22. Antonio Giorgetti, *Nativity* (detail), c. 1662.

Compared with the related casts discussed above, the *Nativity* examined here stands out for the exceptional quality of its execution. The surface is characterised by meticulous chasing, particularly evident in details such as the angel's wing, the garments and hair of the figures, the tufts of straw on which the Child is laid, and the cherubim in the background, whose features and joyful expressions are rendered

with remarkable care. Special mention should also be made of the refined tactile quality of the cloud bank that forms the backdrop to the scene, distinguished by the soft, subtly modulated modelling of the vapours, some of which rise only minimally from the extremely thin surface of the cast.

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