

Hegemony and protectionism in Bologna's meat trade: the role of visual imagery in reputation management

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Abstract

During the Renaissance era visual images were legitimate and authoritative sources of information that influenced behaviour and directed public opinion. Against a background of political and religious unrest and growing pressure for economic reform, it is maintained that Annibale Carracci's painting of *The Butchers Shop* (c1580 - 1583) sought to legitimise the professionalism of Bologna's butchery trades, reinforce the reputation of the guild system and remind audiences of the dangers of papal interference in commercial endeavour. By implicitly advocating the value of institutional hegemony and trade protectionism *The Butchers Shop* represents a form of late sixteenth century visual propaganda and image management.

Keywords

Propaganda;

Image Management;

Visual Imagery;

Butchery;

Guilds.

To shun the surly butcher's greasy tray,
Butcher's, whose hands are dy'd with blood's foul stain,
And always foremost in the hangman's train.

The Art of Walking the Streets of London by John Gay (1685 - 1732)

1. Introduction

Annibale Carracci's *The Butchers Shop* (1580 – 1583) is considered to be one of the most significant paintings of the mid-Renaissance period. Apart from its acclaimed aesthetic qualities and its acknowledged contribution to the genre, the work has been recognised by many scholars for the symbolism inherent within its construction. Numerous interpretations have been put forward to suggest the intrinsic meaning contained within this visual narrative. Its contribution has been discussed within the context of the Burlesque comic tradition,¹ commemorative portraiture,² the reassertion of artistic traditions after the disaster of Mannerism and as a metaphor for Christ's sacrifice.³

The aim of this paper is to suggest a re-interpretation of Carracci's work and one that places the composition within the context of Bologna's economic and cultural history. To date, few studies have explored how commercial activities have been represented in Renaissance imagery, this is despite such works being created during periods of widespread social reconfiguration, market commodification and institutional hegemony. Seen as a work with a specific communicative role, it will be argued that *The Butchers Shop* not only acknowledges the social standing of its patron, it seeks to establish the moral authenticity of the profession it depicts. Through the use of identifiable codes, signs and symbols, Carracci's painting reasserts the reputation of the butchery trades, reinforces the value of the guild system and comments upon the efficacy of papal interference in business endeavour.

The authority of the visual image has been historically recognised and the notion that a work of art may seek to communicate specific meaning is not new.⁴ The paper therefore begins by exploring the legitimacy of the painted form and detailing why artistic works have been able to shape attitudes, influence behaviour and direct public opinion. The value of a visual interpretation is in part dependent upon the cultural, political and social environments from which it was derived.⁵ The paper therefore briefly describes the social and political events within 16th century Bologna that remain key to any re-interpretation. The *Butchers Shop* itself is then examined before the significance of Carracci's painting is discussed and a series of conclusions are drawn.

2. The Legitimacy of the Visual Form

Visual narratives may serve to inform our understanding of history by offering contemporary commentators an underutilised and often unexplored reference source.⁶ Despite the temporal dislocation that exists when attempting to view a historical image through the eyes of the artist, careful contextualisation can help inform subsequent interpretations. This however is not to suggest that artistic works remain impartial or independent of human meaning. Rather they represent a complex social edifice where both knowledge and truth may have multiple interpretations depending upon the context or setting. Indeed, through the blurring of actual and fictitious events, works of art are often criticised for creating an "illusive realty" where narratives have little objectivity and act primarily in the interest of dominant groups or individuals.⁷ While works of art may have offered 16th century audiences hope, encouragement and enlightenment, their value therefore extended beyond any Cuccagnian

ideal.^{8 9} Through established signs, codes and symbols, paintings represented a form of communication that *exuded authenticity*¹⁰ while simultaneously declaring to audiences what was both 'true' and 'genuine'.¹¹ Visual narratives may therefore reflect commonly held beliefs or preconceived ideas and, despite not always being universally agreed or historically accurate, would have been considered legitimate and authoritative.

European painting during the sixteenth century witnessed a move away from the “contemplative abstract form” that characterised many medieval works. Artists and artisans began to place greater emphasis upon the human figure and the portrayal of more natural imagery.¹² While in Italy religious paintings continued to remain the most popular subject matter, a growing interest was witnessed in other forms of composition. The demand for land and seascapes, battle scenes and still life compositions reflected a commodification of the market for artistic works as well as a form of post-Reformation religious iconoclasm. The re-emergence of the merchant classes after the economic stagnation of the early 14th century and the devastating effects of the Black Death saw a growth in consumerism and the large scale production of artistic works.^{13 14} The strong link between the Flemish art market and the Northern Italian cities during the sixteenth century¹⁵ fuelled a growing interest in “genre” art with images of street scenes, markets, bars and taverns proving particularly popular.¹⁶ The demand for these works spanned the social spectrum and contradicted the previously held belief that noble audiences were concerned only with high order themes and representations of ideal beauty.¹⁷ Far from being the domain of vulgar artists and peasant audiences, the demand for scenes of everyday life proved popular across the classes.

Despite the growing availability of printed texts during the Renaissance era, visual imagery continued to represent a widely accepted and legitimate form of communication. In Italy, this

was in part due to widespread levels of illiteracy¹⁸ as well as attempts by the church and state to limit the persuasive power of the printed word. To discourage moves toward more public knowledge, works produced in the vernacular during the Catholic Reformation often remained limited to catechisms and teachings in moral conduct.¹⁹ Unlike much of Northern Europe, the overwhelming majority of doctrinal writings, church legislation and higher instructions remained in Latin and accessible only to clergy, the professions and the educated elite.²⁰ In contrast, visual narratives such as paintings sketches, frescos and drawings remained accessible to the wider populace and represented objects with “uniquely high and concentrated information loads”²¹ that could move beyond the aesthetic to convey deeper, intrinsic meaning.²²

Successfully interpreting any work of art remained reliant upon audiences being able to contextualise the narrative within their own socio-economic and political landscape. Contemporary attempts to unlock the messages embedded within a historical composition similarly requires an appreciation of the prevailing artistic conventions as well as a recognition of the societal influences that shaped its production. A re-interpretation of Annibale Carracci’s *The Butchers Shop* therefore necessitates careful contextualisation and an understanding of the events that informed the creation of this visual narrative.

3. The Historical Context

Across many parts of Europe, the second half of the 16th century represented a period of significant cultural transformation and social enlightenment.²³ Economic advancement was complemented by intellectual reform, scientific progression and literary emancipation. The

ability of both the state and the church to control the channels of communication was also increasingly challenged by the growing demand for privately commissioned works of art. Whilst acknowledging the difficulties that surround any contextualisation, it will be argued that the narrative contained within *The Butchers Shop* reflects a series of underlying pressures for cultural and socio-economic reform accompanied by on-going tensions in the Italian political and religious landscape. Three issues in particular inform our interpretation of Carracci's work. These include the historical relationship between the city of Bologna and the papacy, the public perception of the guild system and the image and reputation of the butchery profession.

3.1 Tensions between Bologna and the Papacy

Traditionally, the birth of the *commune* of Bologna dates from the early 12th century when its citizens were granted imperial protection by Henry V and given leave to pursue their own rights and customs.²⁴ Over the following three centuries the city alternated between signorial and republic regimes punctuated by periods of foreign occupation. Despite the uncertainty that stemmed from these protracted phases of political, social and economic volatility, Bologna continued to assert its civic and religious independence from Rome.²⁵ In the 1390's the city reaffirmed its autonomy with an oligarchic constitution and the construction of a series of buildings around a new civic square. After resisting further challenges from the Visconti of Milan and the papacy during the first half of the 15th century, a 1447 Concordat with Pope Nicholas V offered the city a degree of stability by establishing a *governo misto*. This provided a framework for the retention of local autonomy while at the same time placing Bologna under papal jurisdiction.²⁶

From the beginning of his pontificate in 1503, Pope Julius II sought to again reassert the authority of Rome by reclaiming its papal territories. In 1506, with the support of the French and the Swiss Guard he removed Giovanni Bentivoglio as quasi-signorial ruler of Bologna and declared himself as supreme ruler.²⁷ Despite his reputation for self-aggrandisement Giovanni II had been credited with bringing a period of relative peace and stability to the city as well as embarking upon an ambitious plan of building and architectural rejuvenation.²⁸ Except for a brief period between May 1511 and January 1512, when a government was re-established under the leadership of Giovanni's son, Annibale II, Bologna remained subject to papal rule for the next three centuries.

According to Terpstra,²⁹ the early sixteenth century represented a period when the city negotiated and accommodated its own subordination. Under papal rule, the government of Bologna was divided into two elements. The Senate was comprised of 40 members with each representative being personally selected by the pontiff. While this body presided over civic affairs, they remained subordinate to the papal legate who, as the Pope's representative, took responsibility for justice and public order. Although the Senate positioned themselves as defenders of Bologna's liberty, they also became responsible for shaping a civic identity that placed the city firmly *within* the papal state.³⁰

Rome's patronage allowed the city to project an image of wealth and stability both at home and abroad. In 1530, Bologna gained international recognition when it saw Charles V crowned as Holy Roman Emperor and the treaties of Cambrai and Barcelona were confirmed

by Pope Clement VII. By the second half of the sixteenth century Bologna had a population of approaching 60,000, an established religious community and, partly due to having one of the largest Universities in Europe, an eclectic range of intellectual and scholarly inhabitants. Its thriving economy was primarily built around manufacturing and the silk industry, the latter of which employed around a quarter of the city's inhabitants. It had evaded the plagues that had affected Northern Italy since the mid-1550s and had escaped the famines that had decimated the cities of Modena, Parma and Pavia.³¹

Despite Bologna becoming the second city of the Roman church, the autonomy that it had cultivated over the previous 150 years, had been lost. The University, an enduring symbol of civic pride and local identity was centralised on a papal site, a move that both ensured conformity to the prevailing Catholic dogma as well as signifying the power of Rome. The papacy sought to further reaffirm its domination over the civic authorities through the erection of iconic symbols such as Michelangelo's statue of Julius II and Pius IV's Fountain of Neptune. The construction of a papal fortress at the Porta Galliera, the demolition of sections of the commercial centre and the relocation of part of its population, not only saw a change in the central topography of Bologna, it represented a further symbolic manifestation of Rome's authority over the city.³²

Given the political stability and economic prosperity that Bologna experienced during this period, it is perhaps unsurprising that some of its citizens were able to amass significant personal fortunes through trade and enterprise. Any interference in the regulation of Bologna's business practices was unwelcome and could be interpreted as a direct challenge by Rome to the city's right to manage its own affairs. For example, despite a desire by the

butchery guild to regulate the sale of meat themselves, the Bolognese Government imposed a series of price controls on the industry. Concerned with a need to protect its poorest citizens and guarantee that meat remained affordable, a 1539 edict, *La provisione et limitation sopra il precio delle carni* required set prices to be openly printed and displayed in shops and stalls. Not surprisingly, this proved unpopular amongst the city's butchers who pointed out that shortages in supply had led to increased costs from meat imports. To ensure butchers complied with the law and did not deliberately seek to defraud customers, an inspection body was also established. The *Straordinari di carne* became a common sight around the streets of Bologna as they sought to discourage activities such as under weighing or over charging. The price paid by a customer would be checked and any butcher found guilty of fraudulent practices could be fined. This interference in the urban economy was seen a direct challenge to local government and did little to harmonise relationships between civic society, the Senate and the papacy.³³

3.2 The Guild System

Scholars remain divided on the role played by guilds in medieval and early modern Europe. While some argue they helped overcome structural market inefficiencies, others maintain they acted in the interests of their membership at the expense of the wider economy.³⁴ Such contrary views may reflect the fact that throughout Europe different guilds served a variety of functions, undertook multifarious activities and evolved over hundreds of years. As a consequence, it remains difficult to generalise about their power, influence and links to the political economy.³⁵ Moreover, while some commentators have distinguished between European craft and merchant guilds,³⁶ this distinction can be problematic as individual

institutions may have simultaneously been involved in a range of commercial activities including manufacturing, wholesaling, retailing as well as international trade.

The earliest listing of guilds in Bologna dates from 1259 when a total 21 were recorded in the city. By the beginning of 14th century, guilds had come to occupy a dominant position within the socio-political landscape.³⁷ Continued economic growth in areas such as mercantile banking, textile and leather production led to the demand for skilled workers and an expansion of the migrant population. Innovations in production and the emergence of new industries also led to the formation of new guilds. For example, the wool guild that had been established in 1256 saw itself fragment between those who produced the rough wool cloth (*societas lane bixelle*) and those who produced fine wool (*societas lane gentilis*). Although the silk industry had been slower to develop, by 1317 there were at least 12 silk mills operating in Bologna and by the end of the 14th century, the Silk Guild had established itself amongst the most influential trade bodies in Bologna.

However, by the 16th century, the role of guilds across Europe had changed. In Italy, economic expansion saw many industries evolve their production processes around a system of labour specialisation. For example, the silk industry involved co-ordinating a network of separate weaving, spinning and dyeing workshops. As production expanded to the countryside and the use of non-guild labour for certain manufacturing processes became increasingly common, many craft masters found themselves transformed from independent artisan into wage earner.³⁸ Those who controlled the production process (the merchant – entrepreneurs) oversaw a period where many guilds became mechanisms for labour market control rather than representative bodies concerned with the interests of their membership.^{39, 40}

In an attempt to maintain their autonomy and protect their reputation, many guilds became self-preserving institutions closely aligned with various political authorities who supported their restrictive practices through municipal regulations and the legal system. In Bologna, it has been suggested that guilds became associated with the exercise of both monopolistic and monopsonistic power. By acting as powerful cartels that restricted the purchase of raw materials and the sale of finished goods, they discouraged innovation, reduced investment and inhibited market evolution.^{41 42} For example, a legal edict of 1461 that prevented the establishment of new silk mills in the countryside around Bologna created an urban monopoly and consolidated power in the hands of a small number of established families. Moreover, as the raw silk produced in Bologna was considered to be amongst the highest quality in Italy, attempts were made by the *Arte della Seta*⁴³ to block its export and restrict production to only local businesses.⁴⁴

In contrast, others have argued that it is too simplistic to consider guilds as anachronistic institutions whose anti-competitive practices and restrictive memberships⁴⁵ resulted in the inefficient allocation of market resources.⁴⁶ Their ethos of shared values and social cohesion represented key tenets in understanding civil society. Guilds provided broader social and economic benefits while at the same time affording support and protection to their membership.⁴⁷ The provision of quality guarantees provided consumers with assurances in markets often devoid of product standards, while the creation of trademarks offered an easily recognisable visual identity and acted as a form of brand differentiation.⁴⁸ For those who joined a guild, membership offered a range of benefits including welfare support, cheap credit as well as access to the cumulative commercial expertise of other members.

Epstein⁴⁹ further argues one of the principal benefits of the guild system lay in its apprenticeship scheme. Rather than symbolising an excessively long restrictive practice, apprenticeships helped share the costs and benefits of training, overcome seasonal variations in the labour force and helped reduce the poaching of qualified individuals. Moreover, the existence of formal training and mentoring processes allowed guild members to further differentiate themselves and attract better quality staff. Rather than representing a means of labour market control, the apprenticeship system therefore represented a major investment in human capital.

Far from being resistant to change and unable to cope with variations in market demand,⁵⁰ guilds often exhibited innovative and flexible working practices. In Bologna's silk industry for example, the co-ordination of production phases (weaving, spinning and dyeing) helped reduce transaction costs and maintain product quality.⁵¹ Moreover the tendency for members to physically locate in local clusters not only ensured that standards were maintained between competing practices, it encouraged technological diffusion through labour market spillover.⁵²

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While butchers had been operating in Bologna since Roman times, their power and influence was consolidated during the late 12th century when the government gave them permission to form their own guild (*Arte dei Beccai*). The *matricule* of 1294 noted that the Butchers Guild of Bologna had 752 members.⁵⁴ Through a series of subsequent land purchases in the years following its creation, the guild established a market in the heart of the city and by the end of the 13th century it had succeeded in creating a virtual monopoly over the supply of meat. Over the next four centuries, the Butchers Guild continued to grow in both power and

influence, its members occupied key political and civic posts within the city and butchers became the only guild able to constitute itself into an armed society.^{55 56}

*3.3 Butchers, Fleshers and the Theriophilic Paradox*⁵⁷

Driven in part by an expansion of international trade, the 13th century saw the rise of the *Mercator*. These wholesale merchants accumulated significant wealth and power and became a respectable, political class in their own right.⁵⁸ By the 16th century the growth of the professional classes in Italy challenged the prevailing social hierarchy and called for a reassessment of the divisions that defined rank and order. The simple dichotomy between the labouring third estate and the non-working nobility appeared increasingly irrelevant in the face of a burgeoning bourgeoisie.

In place of the old divisions came new definitions that included a distinction between intellectual and manual labour. Those in the former category represented the “noble metier” and applied rational skills to commercial practices. Their intellectual and social position was reinforced through their patronage of the arts and the cultured leisure pursuits in which they indulged.⁵⁹ In contrast to the honourable activities of the merchant and banker, those who worked with their hands were regarded as “vile metiers” and considered vulgar and dishonest. The basis of this distinction stems, in part, from Cicero's *De Officiis* and his judgement on honourable and dishonourable occupations.⁶⁰ The attainment of *summum bonum* (supreme happiness) was to be achieved through exemplary behaviour, part of which was the observation of one's ethical and moral duties. For example, activities that benefitted the

community, (such as the importation of goods for distribution) was seen as honest and worthwhile. In contrast, middlemen such as retailers, worked only for their own benefit and considered to be at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Within this hierarchy, butchers occupied a paradoxical societal position. Despite the significant wealth accumulated by some individuals and the power exerted by the Butchery Guild, their status amongst Bologna's social elite remained ambiguous. An edict issued in 1453 by the Cardinal legate Bassarion, developed a social classification that, for the first time distinguished beyond that of citizen and non-citizen.⁶¹ Butchers were classified as being below bankers, drapers and silk merchants but above those "who did not practice any trade or craft" (*viles*).⁶² Nobles, from whom the city's civic oligarchy were drawn, comprised third generation citizens who had a doctor or knight in the family and did not pursue a manual craft or trade. While guild membership was not prohibited, it was limited to one of the four *artes superiores*.⁶³ Social rank was reinforced through the city's sumptuary laws that attempted to place restrictions on the types of clothing and jewellery different classes of citizen could wear in public. While the impact of such regulations may have remained more ideological than tangible, they did little to promote the social mobility of the butchery profession amongst Bologna's civic elite.⁶⁴

The reputation of butchers was further undermined by those who considered the sale of meat a particularly 'sordid' matter. Products such as meat, fish and vegetables were associated with the lower functions of the body (consumption, ingestion and excretion) and considered to be physically and morally unclean.⁶⁵ This was reinforced by the association of butchery with contagion and disease. Waste from the slaughter and dismemberment of animals regularly

spilled into the streets and polluted water supplies.⁶⁶ Many civic authorities considered the butchery trade an offensive nuisance open to malfeasance and corrupt practice. While recognising the importance of the meat trade, local regulations often sought to prohibit the slaughtering and of animals in public places or have such activities conducted outside of the town walls.⁶⁷ In Bologna, from the mid-13th century concerns over health and hygiene led to the establishment of a single city abattoir and restrictions on the erection of butchery stalls. However, the influence of the Butchers Guild was evidenced by the location of the complex at the Porta Ravennana in the centre of the city. Its position next to the Aposa canal served as a meat market until the 1560s when a new facility was proposed. Resisting any pressure to relocate outside of the city walls and away from the urban populace, the new market was established close to the existing site.

Prejudices against the butchery profession can also be linked to a more profound, Early Modern philosophical discourse on the morality of animal slaughter and the impact of meat consumption upon the human soul. The doctrines of the Church and the Great Chain of Being⁶⁸ had established that animals were sentient beings who experienced feelings, perceptions and memories. Although implicit within this theory was the basic superiority of man, the Church also accepted that animals were afforded a higher place than lifeless matter within God's hierarchy.^{69 70} These edicts however came to be questioned by scholars such as Michel de Montaigne (1533 - 1592) and Sir Thomas More (1478 - 1535) who queried whether there was a distinction between human reason and animal reaction.⁷¹ If the superiority of humans over animals could be questioned then the difference between man and beasts was not absolute. As animals were able to exercise logic, discrimination, judgement and cunning, there were few differences between them and humans. By the end of the 16th century this theory had become more explicit amongst intellectuals, artists and moralists. The

consumption of meat was considered by some as being a physiologically unnatural act that made men cruel and ferocious.⁷² Such attributes took on symbolic significance during the Renaissance period with visual comparisons between man and beasts being used to highlight human failings. The visual depiction of the slaughtering of animals signified death and corruption and, as a consequence, butchers were considered merciless, cruel figures comparable to that of a public executioner.^{73 74}

Placed within the context of Bologna's business and cultural history and set against a background of institutional hegemony, social mobility and occupational disrepute, it will be argued that *The Butchers Shop* (1580 – 1583) represents a visual narrative that asserts the efficacy of the butchery profession. By contrasting the symbols of exemplary behaviour with negative representations of Rome and the papacy, it is suggested that Carracci seeks to enhance the societal reputation of his patron, reinforce the legitimacy of the guild system as well as establish the butchery trade as being amongst the most *noble of metiers*.

4. Annibale Carracci's *The Butcher's Shop*: a symbol of virtuous endeavour?

Until the late 16th century depictions of commercial activity were confined (in Europe at least) to either frescos or footnotes in manuscripts and carried little iconographic meaning.⁷⁵ This mirrors the more general observation that prior to the Renaissance period, 'work' as a theme had traditionally been ignored by the artistic establishment who deemed it unsuitable for intellectual attention.⁷⁶ From the 1550's onwards, increasing numbers of artistic works depicted individuals undertaking manual activities. However, subjects were often portrayed as deformed characters and their inclusion acted to remind audiences of the stigma associated with physical toil. Such images not only reflected the view that manual labour distorted the

body over time, by reinforcing the concept of the *vile metier* they further strengthened the hegemony of the ruling elite. While paintings such as Vincenzo Campi's (c1530 - 1595) *Fishmongers* (c1580) and Francesco Villamena's (1564–1624) print of the *Castagnaro* (c1600),⁷⁷ sought to highlight the grotesque nature of those who laboured with their hands (*villano*),⁷⁷ Annibale Carracci's painting of *The Butchers Shop* (c1580 - 1583) represents a departure from such representations and emphasises the dignity of work (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Butchers Shop (c1580 – 1583)



The picture is one of two separate scenes of butchers shops painted by Carracci around 1582. Figure 1 is in the collection of Christ Church College, Oxford while the other hangs in the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth.⁷⁸ Despite the latter being smaller (only one twelfth of the size) it is generally not considered to be a preliminary sketch for his much larger composition. Dickerson⁷⁹ notes that unlike the spontaneous and naturalistic style of the Kimbell painting, the Oxford version is ordered and symbolic.⁸⁰ Its size and scale strongly suggests that this was a work specially commissioned by a wealthy patron. Although not unequivocally proven, *The Butchers Shop* (Figure 1) is generally attributed to the Canobbi family who were members of the Butchers Guild of Bologna and controlled around a quarter of the city's meat trade.^{81 82}

The Canobbi's had amassed their fortune during the 1560's when Giuseppe and Girolamo Canobbi constructed a new butchers complex. In return for funding the project they were granted stall holder rights. The revenues that accumulated from the subsequent leasing of the stalls saw their civic status and position within Bologna's social hierarchy rise prominently. Their affluence afforded them an almost aristocratic lifestyle that included their own private chapel in the church of Santi Gregorio e Siro. The commissioning of an altarpiece (subsequently painted by Annibale Carracci) not only signified devotion and reverence to God, it represented a testament to the brothers success. Whether prominently displayed in a church, in the home or at a place of work, paintings were symbols of wealth designed to carry meaning to all those who viewed them. While it may remain impossible to conclusively determine the intended audience for *The Butchers Shop*, an understanding of the historical context allows us to suggest that the painting could conceivably have been aimed at the city's new urban elite. During a period that had witnessed the rise of the professional classes,

Carracci's work addresses the paradoxical societal position of the Canobbi family reaffirming their position within Bologna's evolving social hierarchy.

The Canobbi's choice of artist remains significant. Although trained in a Mannerist style that emphasised a highly idealised approach to imagery, Carracci displayed a fascination for the everyday world that surrounded him. His eclectic style and ability to emulate the compositional form of established classical masters such as Raphael and Michelangelo is evidenced in a number of his works including *The Butchers Shop*.⁸³ When he, together with his brother and cousin founded their own Academy (*Accademia degli Desiderosi*) in 1582, Annibale had already developed a reputation for realistic, empathetic portrayals of working people. His series of 80 drawings of workers and tradesmen in Bologna (*Arti di Bologna*) approach each subject with a degree of sympathetic humour and did much to popularise genre painting in Italy.⁸⁴

The painting itself depicts a scene with four individuals undertaking the everyday activities associated with the preparation and sale of meat: the slaughter, the dressing, the weighing and finally its purchase by the customer. The sympathetic rendering of the subject matter is reinforced by the positioning of characters and objects within the painting. The workers have their backs to the two customers and instead, seek to communicate their activities to the audience. The table that displays the meat is similarly tilted towards the viewer and faces outwards rather than in the direction of those in the shop. Despite the potentially chaotic milieu, the scene is one of order and discipline and the workers are shown to be completing their tasks with great dignity and professionalism.

Figure 2 Michelangelo The Sacrifice of Noah



Figure 3 Raphael The Sacrifice of Noah



The composition reflects Carracci's eclectic skills as an artist and draws upon works from High Renaissance Art and in particular Michelangelo's *Sacrifice of Noah* on the Sistine Chapel and Raphael's fresco of the same title in the Vatican Loggia (Figures 2 and 3). Both works depict acts spiritual devotion around an altar which is located at the centre of the work. Noah, accompanied by his wife and followers, seeks to thank God for his salvation after the flood by officiating over a sacrifice of birds and animals. In *The Butchers Shop*, the upward pointing left arm of the Master Butcher has been compared to the raised hand of Michelangelo's Noah, while the figure crouching before the altar serves as the model for the apprentice. In Raphael's work (Figure 3) the similarity between the kneeling figure and the butcher's trainee is particularly apparent. Parallels may be drawn in the turned position of the head, the hands holding the animal down and the clutching of the knife.⁸⁵ By substituting the altar with a table and by placing his figures around this central feature, Carracci has not only replicated the structural form of the Renaissance Masters, he simultaneously elevated the status of the genre tradition and the butchery profession to the dominion of high art.

Rather than depict the damaging impact of labour upon the human body, Carracci's figures are physically imposing and dominate the foreground of the painting. Even though each worker is formally positioned towards the audience, no one makes eye contact with the viewer. In a manner again reminiscent of the *Sacrifice of Noah*, (Figures 2 and 3) each character remains absorbed in their work. By linking butchers to sacred characters and emphasising their devotion and commitment to the activities they must perform, Carracci seeks to establish the moral authenticity of the profession in the eyes of the viewer.⁸⁶

Unlike the almost cartoon artificiality of workers depicted in the Mannerist tradition,⁸⁷ Carracci individualises each character with different facial features and hairstyles.⁸⁸ Designed to evoke memories of more dignified subjects, the Master Butcher is portrayed as tall and upright and holds the scales in a manner reminiscent of a nobleman holding a sword.⁸⁹ The figure itself bears a close resemblance to Guillain's engraving number 31 of the *Straordinari di carne* in *Arti di Bologna* (Figure 4).⁹⁰ Both are holding a steelyard and weighing meat, in front of the customer. By linking the principal character in the composition to a public appointee, Carracci makes an implicit connection between the butchery profession and the upholders of Bologna's civic authority.⁹¹

Figure 4 *Straordinari di carne*



While butchery guilds sought to enforce quality standards and regulate the conduct of its members, their jurisdiction and authority was often limited.⁹² As a consequence, some sellers were able to operate out with the regulations that sought to govern their industry. The inclusion of scales in the composition therefore reaffirms the honesty inherent within the guild system and represent a transparent expression of the trust that purchasers could place in its members. Similarly, the butcher standing behind the table is reaching for a sprig of willow. Rather than wrap meat in paper for transport home, thin wooden branches were often used to create a form of carrying handle. Meat transported in this manner could easily be recognised and weighed by the *Straordinari di carne*. By including this activity in the composition, Carracci explicitly demonstrates how guild members uphold the law through the adoption of legitimate business practices.

Welch⁹³ notes that Renaissance economic theory was critical of the sale of products through intermediaries as they provided an additional mark up on goods and tended to vary prices according to circumstance. As a consequence, peddlers and street sellers were often criticised for being fraudsters who sought to exploit and deceive the customer. In contrast, vendors who had their own premises, butchered their own animals and sold directly to the consumer, represented a form of exchange relationship that directly benefitted the community and remained characteristic of *De Officiis*' honourable occupation. Carracci seeks to illustrate this exemplary behaviour through the explicit display of a price list (*bandi*) in the top right hand corner of the painting. Despite the fraudulent practices of some sellers, those in *The Butchers Shop* adhere to the city's regulations and price controls and, as such, they symbolise the morality and integrity of their profession and the guild system.

Kneeling in the front of the painting about to slaughter a ram, is the butcher's apprentice. Created during a period when the morality of animal sufferance and the ethics of meat consumption was being openly debated, the painting also serves to remind audiences of the professionalism and competence of the butchery trade. While animals were slaughtered for food, the need to minimise suffering is also recognised. The composition's link to higher order Biblical themes and the works of Michelangelo and Raphael suggests to audiences that they are witnessing representations of ritual sacrifice rather than acts of unnecessary cruelty. Far from being a disreputable occupation intent on destroying life, audiences are reminded how the guild system promoted skilled labour and maintained quality standards through their investment in human capital.

Even though the painting is of a butchers shop, there is very little blood either on the floor or on the clothing of the employees. Despite animal slaughter representing an everyday event and audiences being very familiar with the smell of decay and sight of blood, Carracci's painting stresses the cleanliness of the work space. The apron and shirt of the Master is almost pristine white and there is no blood on the hands or even under the fingernails of any of the workers. While the dog waits patiently under the table looking out expectantly for any scraps that may be dropped, its face shows disappointment. Through such imagery, the proficiencies of the guild and the minimisation of animal sufferance are further reinforced. Renaissance audiences would be reminded that *The Butchers Shop* symbolised containment, order and control rather than any representation of human failing.

Those who work in the shop contrast sharply with those who are patronising it. While Wind⁹⁴ considers the presence of these characters as having both comic and erotic symbolism, this interpretation may be questioned. The inclusion of a soldier on the left of the painting is a halberdier and suggests a direct reference to Bologna's position as a papal state and the historical tensions with Rome. The soldier for whom the meat is being weighed is portrayed as somewhat of a buffoon with an enlarged codpiece, drooping feather and pike dangling between his legs. He is making a somewhat clumsy attempt to take money out of his purse. By examining the weaponry and clothing worn by the soldier, it is apparent that he represents a member of the Swiss Guard.⁹⁵ In the 16th century, the papal militia usually carried a broadsword and halberd (pike). They wore a doublet or jacket which had no collar. This was fitted at the waist and ended in a point that went under the belt. Breeches were puffed and decorated with coloured bands of material that went as far as the knee. Below this, soldiers usually wore stockings. Members of the Swiss Guard wore various types of headgear that included a wide brimmed hat and a padded leather turban-shaped cap, these were normally trimmed with brightly coloured pheasant or heron feathers.⁹⁶

Interestingly, Carracci has incorporated a codpiece into the soldier's uniform. While the codpiece represented a dominant fashion accessory during the late 15th and early 16th century, by the 1580s its popularity had waned.⁹⁷ It continued to remain however with members of the military where it had acquired a more functional purpose. The spread of syphilis during the Renaissance period has been well documented with the first European epidemic being recorded in 1493.⁹⁸ Enlarged codpieces were used to provide padding and hold bandages in place, protect clothes against discharge and provide the wearer with a degree of protection from items worn on the belt. Moreover, in an attempt to hide the disease,

many soldiers incorporated the codpiece into their uniform as those who carried syphilis were publicly persecuted, banned from shops and in the case of soldiers, dismissed from the army.

Carracci's inclusion of the Swiss mercenary appears to be a deliberate reference to the authority of Rome and his unsympathetic portrayal of the character would not have gone unnoticed by sixteenth century audiences. As members of the Pope's guard, halberdiers were both exempt from taxes and able to slaughter their own livestock, it would therefore have been highly unusual to see one purchasing meat from an ordinary butcher's shop.⁹⁹ By including the soldier in the composition, Carracci not only reminds audiences of Pope Julius' retake of the city in 1506, he comments upon the increasing erosion of civic society through papal interference. Placed within the context of Rome's imposition of price controls and the enforcement of regulations via the *Straordinari di carne*, *The Butchers Shop* becomes a symbolic expression of the contempt that families such as the Canobbi's had for the papacy and its political authority.

In the background of the painting is an old woman who is sometimes attributed to being the halberdier's wife. In contrast to the noble stature of those who work in the shop, she is depicted with a furrowed face and pointed nose. Wind¹⁰⁰ suggests that the proximity of her hand to a piece of meat "carne" has clear sexual overtones. Her inclusion in the painting therefore represents a further attempt to inject an element of erotic humour into the subject matter. Given the symbolism and meaning contained within other elements of the composition, such an explanation seems unlikely. Schneider¹⁰¹ for example, suggests that rather than pointing to the meat, the woman is attempting to steal it from the table. Such an interpretation would reinforce the overall theme of the painting and allow the viewer to

compare the honesty and integrity of guild members with the unscrupulous nature of those who relied upon the meat trade.

5. Conclusion

Pictorial narratives represent a widely available, yet relatively underutilised information source that can offer new insights into our cultural and business history. While not all sixteenth century works of art sought to convey meaning, the legitimacy of this form of expression meant that paintings represented a credible and authoritative channel of communication. At the same time, deconstructing visual imagery is recognised as being subjective, intuitive and unscientific. Multiple interpretations of the same work remain possible and the danger exists of simply assigning meaning based upon the recognition of various signs, symbols and literary keys. The interpretation of *The Butchers Shop* put forward in this paper is therefore not something necessarily derived from agreement and the cues provided by the artist can lead to alternative explanations of Carracci's work.

While some commentators have maintained that *The Butchers Shop* functions as a religious metaphor or an example of erotic Renaissance humour,¹⁰² this paper places the composition within the context of Bologna's political landscape. While accepting that it cannot be unequivocally proven, it suggests that Carracci's work represents a commentary upon the socio-economic tensions that underlay civic life in sixteenth century Italy. The symbols of professional conduct and personal reassurance, the linking to sacred characters and the departure from traditional depictions of work, all arguably promote the legitimacy of the guild system and the reputation of the butchery profession. Moreover, the implicit narrative

of Carracci's composition may be interpreted as an advocacy of institutional hegemony and trade protectionism.

It has however been suggested that Carracci's work extends beyond an attempt to locate butchery amongst the most *noble metiers* and the attainment of *summum bonum*. The commissioning of *The Butchers Shop* is illustrative of the contribution artistic works could play in helping to establish an individual's position within the prevailing social hierarchy. For those who could afford private commissions, the acceptance of genre art as a compositional form not only provided an opportunity to construct reality,¹⁰³ it offered societal prominence as well as political and economic legitimacy. If, as suggested in this paper, the painting sought to openly and transparently denounce Rome's interference in Bologna's civic and commercial activities, the status and reputation of its patron would have been significantly reinforced. By being able to contrast the inept and dishonest against the skilled and proficient, Annibale Carracci's *The Butchers Shop* could be considered an example of reputation management as well as a form of sixteenth century political propaganda.

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Endnotes

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- ¹ Wind, "Pitture ridicole".
- ² Zapperi, *Annibale Carracci*.
- ³ Martin, "The Butcher's Shop of the Carracci".
- ⁴ Bedaux, "Fruit and Fertility"; Panofsky, *Meaning in the visual arts*; Gombrich, *Gombrich on the Renaissance*.
- ⁵ Harrison, "Evaluating artistic work".
- ⁶ Schroeder, "Consuming Representation:".
- ⁷ Baudrillard, *Aesthetic Illusion and Disillusion in Conspiracy* ed. Lotringer ; Schroeder and Borgerson, "Innovations in Information Technology"; Shepherd, "Fieldwork Without Remorse".
- ⁸ Cuccagna (or Cockaigne) represented a mythical land of plenty during medieval times. See for example the work by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Luilekkerland* (1567).
- ⁹ McTighe, "Perfect Deformity"; Torikian, "Against a perpetuating fiction".
- ¹⁰ Brown et al., "Teaching Old Brands New Tricks".
- ¹¹ Kansteiner, "Finding Meaning in Memory".
- ¹² Schroeder and Borgerson, "Innovations in Information Technology", p.156.
- ¹³ Ormrod, "Art and its Markets"; Schroeder and Borgerson, "Innovations in Information Technology".
- ¹⁴ In the Netherlands alone, it has been estimated that between five and ten million works of art were created during the "Golden Age" (1568 - 1648). See Montias, *Vermeer and his Milieu*.
- ¹⁵ Cecchini details the complex network of trade relationships that existed between Italian purchasers and Flemish artists during the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Cecchini, "Going South", in *Moving Pictures* ed. Marchi and Raux.
- ¹⁶ Schroeder and Borgerson, "Interpretive methodology".
- ¹⁷ McTighe, "Perfect Deformity".
- ¹⁸ McTighe, "Foods and the Body".
- ¹⁹ Cohen and Cohen, *Daily life in Renaissance Italy*, p.132-133.
- ²⁰ This situation may be contrasted with the works of Martin Luther (1483 – 1546) whose influential tracts were widely received amongst the German people having originally been written in the vernacular rather than Latin.
- ²¹ Ormrod, "Art and its Markets" p.548;
- ²² Freathy and Thomas, "Marketplace Metaphors".
- ²³ Hall, *The Scientific Renaissance*.
- ²⁴ Tamba "Civic Institutions" in *A companion to Medieval and Renaissance Bologna*, ed. Blanshei, 211.
- ²⁵ The population of Bologna shrank from approximately 50,000 at the beginning of the 14th century to around 23,000 by 1348.
- ²⁶ Terpstra suggests that the Concordat allowed Bologna to retain the symbolism of independence while sharing power with Rome.
- ²⁷ The Bentivoglio family had a number of reasons to distrust Rome. The son of Giovanni I had been murdered by papal officials in 1435 while Annibale, the second family members to rule Bologna was assassinated with the support of Pope Eugene IV in 1445.
- ²⁸ Clarke, "Magnificence and the city"; "Art, Patronage and Civic Identities" in *The Court Cities*, ed. Rosenberg.
- ²⁹ Terpstra, "Civic self-fashioning in Renaissance Bologna".
- ³⁰ Duranti "Libertas, Oligarchy, Papacy" in *A companion to Medieval and Renaissance Bologna* ed. Blanshei 282
- ³¹ Drogin, "Art, Patronage and Civic Identities" in *The Court Cities*, ed. Rosenberg; Dickerson, *Raw Painting*; Alfani, *Calamities and the Economy*.
- ³² Drogin, "Art, Patronage and Civic Identities" in *The Court Cities*, ed. Rosenberg.
- ³³ Interference from Rome continued for at least 50 years. For example, in 1638 the price of straw hats was fixed by the papal legate who awarded the contract to a single supplier (see for example Guenzi, "The Hatmakers Guild", in *Guilds, Markets and Work Regulations*, ed. Guenzi, Massa, and Caselli.
- ³⁴ Ogilvie, "The Economics of Guilds".
- ³⁵ Epstein, "Craft guilds in the pre-modern economy". Ogilvie, "The Economics of Guilds".
- ³⁶ Greif et al., "Coordination, commitment, and enforcement".
- ³⁷ Dickerson, *Raw Painting* p.32.
- ³⁸ Poni and Mori estimate that by 1591 over 25,000 people were dependent upon the Bologna silk industry, half of whom were female weavers.
- ³⁹ Borelli, "A Reading of the Relationship" in *Guilds, Markets and Work Regulations*, ed. Guenzi, Massa, and Caselli.
- ⁴⁰ The decline of the Lucchese silk industry has been attributed by some commentators to the control exercised by established families, who unlike the merchant entrepreneurs, failed to invest in new forms of technology. See

Giusberti and Roversi Monaco, "Economy and Demography", in *A companion to Medieval and Renaissance Bologna*, ed. Blanshei, 168.

⁴¹ Richardson, "A Tale of Two Theories".

⁴² For a more detailed discussion on the impact of the guild system on innovation see for example Boldorf (2009).

⁴³ This was an "umbrella guild". By the end of the 16th century the industry was controlled by a small number (50-60) of merchant entrepreneurs (see Giusberti and Roversi Monaco, "Economy and Demography", in *A companion to Medieval and Renaissance Bologna*, ed. Blanshei, 172.

⁴⁴ Giusberti and Roversi Monaco, *ibid.*

⁴⁵ Ogilvie notes how guilds excluded amongst others "Jews, bastards, migrants, laborers, farmers, propertiless men, former serfs and slaves, gypsies ..." Ogilvie, "The Economics of Guilds", 173.

⁴⁶ Ogilvie, "The Economics of Guilds"; Boldorf, "Socio-Economic Institutions".

⁴⁷ Epstein, "Craft Guilds, Apprenticeship, and Technological Change".

⁴⁸ For a discussion of how Guilds sought to protect their brand reputation see De Munck (2011).

⁴⁹ Epstein, *Craft guilds in the pre-modern economy*.

⁵⁰ Ogilvie, "The Economics of Guilds".

⁵¹ Mocarelli, "Guilds Reappraised".

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Giusberti and Roversi Monaco, "Economy and Demography", in *A companion to Medieval and Renaissance Bologna*, ed. Blanshei.

⁵⁴ Giusberti and Roversi Monaco, *ibid.*

⁵⁵ Martines, *Power and Imagination*:

⁵⁶ The status of the guild was underlined in the early 1570's when they commissioned Bartolomeo Passarotti (1529 - 1592) one of the leading painters in Bologna to paint an altarpiece for the basilica of San Petronio (one of only two guilds given this honour). Although guilds frequently commissioned works to be displayed in churches and cathedrals, San Petronio was a communal church that had been built as part of the city's challenge to Rome's religious authority during the 1390s. Located on the Piazza Maggiore in the centre of the city, the church overshadowed the bishop's cathedral church and had become one of the primary symbols of Bologna's autonomy from the papal state. The granting of the right to decorate an altarpiece therefore underlined the significant power and influence of the Butchers Guild.

⁵⁷ John Wilmot second Earl of Rochester (1647 - 1680) argued that human beings occupied a lower position than beasts in the known Universe. While humans occupied a higher rung in the Universal hierarchy (evidenced in the power over the animal world) the moral behaviour of mankind placed them on a lower rung than animals.

⁵⁸ Irmscher, "Ministrae voluptatum".

⁵⁹ McTighe, "Perfect Deformity".

⁶⁰ Irmscher, "Ministrae voluptatum".

⁶¹ The Bessarion norms were maintained in Bologna up until the Council of Trent.

⁶² Gardi, *Making of an Oligarchy: The Ruling Classes of Bologna* in *A companion to Medieval and Renaissance Bologna*, ed. Blanshei. 322.

⁶³ The *artes superiores* comprised the bankers, notaries, drapers and silk merchants.

⁶⁴ Campanini notes that the city attempted to regulate the clothes that citizens wore and that individuals should only wear clothes that was suitable for their status.

⁶⁵ Falkenburg, "Matters of Taste".

⁶⁶ Nicholas, *The Later Medieval City*; Thrupp, *The Merchant Class*.

⁶⁷ Sabine, "Butchering in Mediaeval London"; Keene, "Feeding Medieval European Cities".

⁶⁸ Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*.

⁶⁹ This view was later challenged by Descartes (1596 - 1650). In 1637 he argued that the observed behaviour of all animals other than humans could be explained without ascribing them a conscious. While both men and beasts breathe eat and move, only humans have rational souls that could expect an afterlife. Animals could be viewed as automata and moved like clockwork. They were unthinking and remained devoid of feelings and a soul. As a consequence humans had no moral duty towards them or the natural world (see for example, Shugg, "The Cartesian Beast-Machine". Armstrong and Botzler, *René Descartes*.

⁷⁰ Cockburn, "A Short, Meat-Oriented History"; Hughes, "Spenser's Acrasia"; Woolloch, "Rousseau and the love of animals".

⁷¹ More, *Utopia*; Cockburn, "A Short, Meat-Oriented History"; Hughes, "Spenser's Acrasia".

⁷² Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*.

⁷³ A common (though erroneous) belief in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was that butchers were ineligible for jury service in capital trials owing to their cruel inclinations.

⁷⁴ Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*.

⁷⁵ Welch, *Shopping in the Renaissance*.

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- ⁷⁶ McKiernan, “Images of work”.
- ⁷⁷ McTighe “Perfect Deformity”; Freathy and Thomas, “Marketplace Metaphors”.
- ⁷⁸ The painting was bequeathed to the college in 1765 by General John Guise.
- ⁷⁹ Dickerson, *Raw Painting*.
- ⁸⁰ This view is further reinforced by the existence of compositional studies that place the primary figures in a series of alternative poses.
- ⁸¹ The Canobbi family later commissioned Annibale Carracci to paint the *Baptism of Christ* (1585) for the church of San Gregorio.
- ⁸² Dickerson, *Raw Painting*; Dickerson, “Butchers as murderers” in *Murder in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Dean and Lowe; Robertson, “Carracci and Invenzione”.
- ⁸³ Some art historians later criticised Carracci for his lack of own personal artistic style (see de los Cobos 2005).
- ⁸⁴ Although only one of Carracci’s original drawings is thought to still survive, the series was later engraved by Simon Guillain in 1646 and published as *Diverse figure al numero di ottanta, diseguate di penna nell'hore di ricreatione da Annibale Carracci*, but more commonly referred to by the title of the second edition *Arti di Bologna*.
- ⁸⁵ Martin “The Butchers Shop of the Carracci” 266.
- ⁸⁶ Beverland et al., “Projecting Authenticity”; Hartmann and Ostberg “Authenticating by re-enchantment”.
- ⁸⁷ See for example Bartolomeo Passarotti’s *The Butchers Shop* (1577 -80).
- ⁸⁸ The care taken to personalise each subject provides further evidence that *The Butchers Shop* was a commissioned work.
- ⁸⁹ Zapperi, *Annibale, Carracci*.
- ⁹⁰ Although parallels between the Master Butcher and the *Straordinari di carne* have been made previously, see Martin (1963), its significance in the context of visual propaganda and reputation management have not been discussed.
- ⁹¹ In one of Carracci’s preparatory sketches for the painting the similarities are even more pronounced as the Master Butcher is wearing a cap similar to the *Straordinari di carne*.
- ⁹² Maclachlan, “A bloody offal nuisance”.
- ⁹³ Welch, *Shopping in the Renaissance*.
- ⁹⁴ Wind, “Pitture ridicole”.
- ⁹⁵ This view is supported by Martin (1963) who makes reference to the soldier being a Swiss in the Cardinal’s guard.
- ⁹⁶ Vatican (2017) “*The Uniform of the Swiss Guard*”.
- ⁹⁷ Vicary, “Visual Art as Social Data”.
- ⁹⁸ Beretta, “The Revival of Lucretian Atomism”.
- ⁹⁹ Dickerson, *Raw Painting*.
- ¹⁰⁰ Wind, “Pitture ridicole”.
- ¹⁰¹ Schneider, *The Art of the Still Life*.
- ¹⁰² Martin, “The Butchers Shop of the Carracci”; Wind, “Pitture Ridicole”.
- ¹⁰³ Kempers, *Painting, Power, and Patronage*: