

Hannah Sammut

Viewing Assignment #3



Seppellimento di Santa Petronilla

Giovanni Francesco Berberi (Guercino)

1621-1623

Oil on canvas

720 x 423 cm

Capitoline Museums, Rome

Image taken at Capitoline Museums

(I couldn't get a selfie)

The truly massive and overwhelming work by Guercino, *Seppellimento di Santa Petronilla*

(Burial of Saint Petronilla) (1621-1623) is one that commands attention with its realism, palette,

and sheer size. It's no wonder this work is so huge and gravitating—it was commissioned by the Bolognese Pope Gregory XV for placement in a chapel dedicated to the saint in St. Peter's Basilica. It also has a long history; it was later moved to the Quirinal Palace in 1730 (in an effort to preserve the devotional paintings of the church), was later taken by Napoleon's troops to Paris, brought back to Italy by Antonio Canova, and was finally placed in the Capitoline Museums of Rome in 1818, where it continues to stay.

The work is divided into two sections; the bottom portion depicts the burial¹ of the saint by various onlookers, and the top portion, which depicts her ascension into heaven and her receiving by Christ and other heavenly figures. Therefore, the eye is drawn to two places, both at the top where the saint is being received and at the bottom, where she is being hoisted in her grave on the earthly plane. There is immense detail in this work, from the luxuriously-rendered fabrics of the figures, the apparent age and complexions of the onlookers, and, most notably, the chiaroscenic rendering of the figures. The image definitely has some Caravaggio influences, especially in the lighting of the figures and in the dramatic *affetti* of their expressions. Scholars have noted similarities between this painting and Caravaggio's *Entombment*.² Additionally, the vibrant blue sky serves as another focal point for the image.

Analyses of the image have identified some of the figures. Petronilla, who was initially considered to be the daughter of Saint Peter (Counter-Reformation historians later designated her as Peter's *spiritual offspring*), is alongside her father, yet Mangone and Unglaub suggest that

¹ Whether Saint Petronilla is actually being buried or exhumed will be discussed later in this analysis.

² Preimesberger, 'Pittura Gobba', 101–107 referenced in Mangone, Carolina, and Jonathan Unglaub. "Guercino's Saint Petronilla: Saintly Body, Michelangelo, and New St Peter's." *Art History* 45, no. 1 (2022): 66–101. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.12630>.

Guercino depicted St. Peter to look like Michelangelo as an homage to the artist. This theory is supported by portraits of the artist and descriptions of him by Vasari. Additionally, Michelangelo's *Pieta* finished over 20 years prior "shared much of its history, location, and veneration in the basilica with the cult of St Petronilla.³"

Interestingly, Saint Petronilla's presence in St. Peters is for political reasons, as she was a spiritual protector of French kings. Carolyn Wood and Louise Rice "both underscore the diplomacy of the altarpiece commission" in their research and "see the painting as an effort to maintain good Franco-Vatican relations" as an appeal to King Louis XIII to join in military campaigns against Protestants.⁴

Yet, there is some discourse about whether Saint Petronila is actually being lowered or exhumed from her grave—a detail that would significantly alter the meaning of the work. While the title suggests that she is, in fact, being buried, Steinberg argues that the saint is being exhumed, supported by preliminary sketches of Guercino's at Windsor which show figures hoisting a slab.⁵ Steinberg argues that the lack of clarity on whether Petronilla was being exhumed or buried was a deliberate choice by Guercino.⁶ While the traditional story of her life in the first century claims she was buried, her remains were subsequently interred when St. Peters was rebuilt. In my opinion, it does seem like she is being hoisted out of her grave by both the figure in the tomb

³ Mangone, Carolina, and Jonathan Unglaub. "Guercino's Saint Petronilla: Saintly Body, Michelangelo, and New St Peter's." *Art History* 45, no. 1 (2022): 66–101. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.12630>.

⁴ Wood, 'Indian Summer', 208–210; Rice, Altars, 52–56 referenced in Mangone, Carolina, and Jonathan Unglaub. "Guercino's Saint Petronilla: Saintly Body, Michelangelo, and New St Peter's." *Art History* 45, no. 1 (2022): 66–101. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.12630>

⁵ "Guercino (Cento 1591-Bologna 1666) - a Composition Study for the Burial and Reception into Heaven of St Petronilla." Royal Collection Trust.

⁶ Steinberg, Leo. "Guercino's 'Saint Petronilla.'" *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 35 (1980): 207–42. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4238683>.

pushing up her body and by the figures pulling her with linen straps. Regardless of the narrative, this work is truly magnificent and representative of both Guercino's and the Italian Baroque style.