

# BALANCING THE SAINTS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE INCLUSION OF DIVINE INTERCESSORS

MALVIKA PANDYA

The resulting art from the period of the Black Death and the time following it is deeply indicative of the general population's emotions at the time as they faced fear and sickness. Much of the art produced in response to the plague is religious in nature, yet the specifics of the saints and scenes portrayed varies vastly through time and geographic locations. Though the depiction of Saints Roch and Sebastian were common, local saints also appeared in several works. In this essay, I perform a closer inspection of four separate paintings, and argue that the inclusion of common and local saints were used to create a cumulative effect of protection for a patron or city.

The Black Death's overwhelming effects were felt throughout Europe as an astonishing portion of the population experienced its devastation. Because this wave of plague was so widespread and severe, it almost served as a universal experience that would be relatable to any person at the time. This universal experience mirrors the use of universal plague saints Roch and Sebastian, who were considered to be the most well-known and specific intercessors of the plague, given their direct relation to the disease. Because these saints were well-established in their power, a plea to St. Roch and St. Sebastian may have been considered to be the fastest path to salvation, something desperately needed by many at the time, resulting in the abrupt rise of plague saint popularity. However, during the later outbreaks, various cities experienced spreads at different time intervals, and although these outbreaks occurred less often, they were usually intensely catastrophic. These city-specific plagues may have been viewed as punishment from heaven for the actions of the town and the people within it, possibly leading to increased invocation of local saints in hopes of protection. Local saints were proposed by the consensus of their respective communities, largely in response to the nominated saint's history of performing miracles, especially those that

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**Contact:** Malvika Pandya <mapandya@umich.edu>

concerned medical healing or cures<sup>1</sup>. If approved by the town, a cult of the local saint could subsequently form and “. . . provide it [the town] with monetary benefits, social prestige, and spiritual patronage . . . [and] unify the community by prompting ritual devotion on a larger scale”<sup>2</sup>. Despite the fact that these local saints could have been considered to be less powerful than conventional saints, their benefit may lie in the extreme loyalty they retain for their city and their ability to plead fiercely on behalf of the city for its salvation. Although the inclusion of local saints is widespread throughout plague art, they were seen as less powerful than universal plague saints, but the unique ability of patron saints to argue for a specific city led to their rise in popularity for use in civic spaces. However, this technique was not employed until later plague outbreaks that occurred in the 16th-17th century. For this reason, it may have been considered more effective to combat early plague outbreaks with the inclusion of multiple saints or more powerful saints in the use of ex-votos and plague artwork.

Although St. Sebastian has no explicit connection to the plague, his popularity as a plague saint is largely due to his status as a martyr. The *Passio Sancti Sebastiani*, a scripture containing the story of Sebastian’s life and subsequent sainthood, claims that “. . . Sebastian was a member of the elite Praetorian guard under the Emperors Maximian and Diocletian; though a Christian, Sebastian kept his faith a secret in order to use his military status to help imprisoned Christians”<sup>3</sup>. After his true faith was discovered, he was sentenced to death and shot with an excessive number of arrows, after which his Christian counterparts found his dying form and were able to revive him. With a new chance at life, Sebastian once again incurred the wrath of the emperor due to his defense of Christians, resulting in his death sentence, which was more successful than his last<sup>4</sup>. However, “. . . a subsequent apparition by Sebastian to yet another Roman matron revealed the location of his body . . . [and] Sebastian’s recovered body was given proper burial”<sup>5</sup>. Given the connecting imagery, the same arrows that pierced Sebastian’s skin as a punishment for his faith in Christianity took on a new meaning in plague times, instead mirroring the arrows that are representative of God’s wrath towards the people in the form of plague. Even with this vague association, Sebastian’s real power comes from his status as a martyr, which were “. . . fellow human beings who, precisely because of their death, now enjoyed intimacy with God. And through that intimacy came their power

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1. J. Peterson, *Suspect Saints and Holy Heretics: Disputed Sanctity and Communal Identity in Late Medieval Italy*, 23–24 (2019).

2. Peterson, 28.

3. F. Mormando, Introduction: Response to the Plague in Early Modern Italy: What the Primary Sources, Printed and Painted, Reveal. *Hope and Healing: Painting in Italy in a Time of Plague, 1500–1800*, 30 (2005).

4. Mormando, 30.

5. Mormando, 30–31.

to intercede with God on behalf of their devotees”<sup>6</sup>. By worshiping St. Sebastian, his followers recognized his sacrifices mirrored by those of Christ in hopes of receiving second-handed sympathy from God.

In direct contrast to St. Sebastian, St. Roch had a direct connection to the plague, which helps to more clearly explain his rise in popularity at the time. According to the detailed biography of St. Roch in the *Acta Braviora*, “. . . embarked on a pilgrimage to Rome during his early adulthood. Enroute, he passed through several cities in northern and central Italy stricken by plague and effected a series of miraculous cures”<sup>7</sup>, already establishing his power of protection over the plague, which was further strengthened when Roch himself fell ill to the plague, yet managed to survive. He was later falsely arrested on charges of spying and spent five years in prison, but “At his death he was granted the power to save others from the plague by divine fiat”<sup>8</sup>. Given his explicit power to protect from the plague, Roch’s following dramatically increased in size during the various plagues between 1477–1479, finally reaching true height when the governor of Venice created a new chronology in which “. . . Diedo provides the exact words: ‘Those suffering from the plague, fleeing to the protection of Roch, will escape that most violent contagion’ ”<sup>9</sup>. Roch, unlike Sebastian, is typically shown healing people and his piety and survival may have been what drew people towards him in hopes of securing their own means to survival.

The use of local saints also gained prominence during the numerous plague outbreaks in Europe at the time, but by no means were they a novel innovation. City saints had been used in the past to defend the city against any forms of hardship, whether it be famine or natural disasters, and their protection was hoped to extend to sickness as the plague carried on. It was thought that the veneration of local saints would ensure salvation of their city given their strong devotion towards their city. Louise Marshall emphasizes this point, claiming “Local patron saints were often the first line of supernatural defense for many communities, because they were bound to their city by special ties of affection and interest and could be relied upon to plead its cause with all the vigor and passion of a citizen on an urgent embassy to a foreign dignitary”<sup>10</sup>. There were caveats to the powers of the local saints, however, as they remained low in the hierarchy of divine intercessors. It is typically considered that the local saints would have prayed to more powerful and well-established saints, in hopes that

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6. L. Marshall, Manipulating the Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy. *Renaissance Quarterly*, 47, 493 (1994).

7. Marshall, 502.

8. Marshall, 502.

9. Marshall, 504.

10. L. Marshall. Plague Literature and Art, Early Modern Europe. *Encyclopedia of Pestilence, Pandemics, and Plague* 1, 525 (2008).

their conjunctive prayers would be enough to draw the sympathy of the Virgin Mary and/or God on behalf of the town's citizens. This hierarchy of sorts may sometimes be depicted through the intentional positioning and sizing of divine figures within religious plague art.

St. Sebastian was a popular subject of art during plague times as a form of worship, as demonstrated by Pietro Perugino's wood panel painting, *Martyred*



**Fig. 1:** Perugino, P. (Ca. 1450–1523). Saint Sebastian [oil on wood panel]. Borghese Gallery, Rome, Italy. <https://borghese.gallery/collection/paintings/st-sebastian.html>

*Sebastian*, created in the late 1400s (Fig. 1). As was the trend at the time of the Quattrocento, Sebastian is pictured alone, standing underneath an ornate archway with his hands tied behind his back. This trend is marked by a “. . . lack of narrative action: the archers are either inactive or, more usually, absent. Focus has shifted from the dramatic moment of the martyrdom, when the executioners deliver a volley of arrows and crossbow bolts into the martyr’s flesh, to an isolated representation of the suffering saint”<sup>11</sup>. Although his body is pierced with two arrows, Sebastian appears unbloodied, seemingly unaffected by the pain inflicted upon him by his executioners. He wears a simple loincloth, bringing attention to the sculpted planes of his body, evoking from the viewer a sense of godliness and ethereality, an assumed deliberate choice by Perugino, who is presumably following the popular depictions of St. Sebastian as “. . . a young, handsome, athletic hero, usually naked or nearly so”<sup>12</sup>. His gaze is directed upwards, perhaps looking towards heaven and embracing his newly found divinity, marked by the faint halo around his golden curls.

The depiction of St. Sebastian’s suffering and body position by Perugino summons a mirror image of Christ hanging upon the Cross, both meeting their end as a result of their role as a sacrificial lamb, paying for the sins of humanity. Marshall asserts that “The essential meaning of the image lies in its proffering of Sebastian’s pierced yet living body before the worshiper’s gaze”<sup>13</sup>, serving as a powerful inspiration for a viewer to instill humility and piety within themselves as they gaze upon the great sacrifice of St. Sebastian. Although a grim representation, “. . . the image of Sebastian, martyred and yet alive, celebrates his resurrection as proof of his inexhaustible capacity to absorb in his own body the plague arrows destined for his worshipers”<sup>14</sup>. His martyred yet peaceful body serves as both a hope and reminder to his followers as they must directly consider the source of their protection and the cost from which it came.

A primary example of St. Roch’s typical depiction at the time can be seen in Jacopo Bassano’s *St. Roch Visits the Plague-Stricken*, painted in 1575 (Fig. 2). The painting depicts the Virgin Mary in her divine form at the top of the painting, marked by one of the few vibrant colors in the work, wearing a pink and blue garb and bathed in a heavenly yellow light, contrasted by the dark and swirling clouds surrounding her. These clouds are being grasped by angel figures, who seem to be struggling to open a chasm in the sky in order for Mary to appear. In the lower half of the painting appears St. Roch, also painted with bright colors, surrounded by victims of the plague, some laying at his feet while others are

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11. L. Marshall, *Manipulating the Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy*. *Renaissance Quarterly*, 47, 496 (1994).

12. Mormando, 31.

13. Marshall, 496.

14. Marshall, 500.



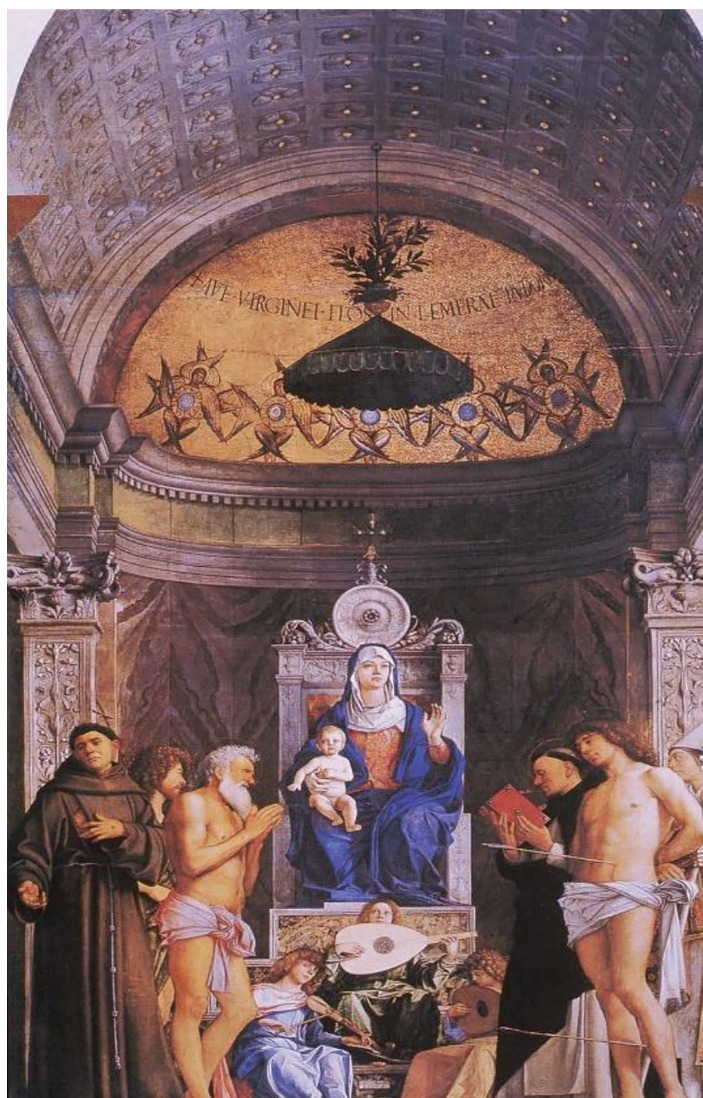


**Fig. 2:** Bassano, J. (1575). *St. Roch Visits the Plague-Stricken* [oil on canvas]. Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan, Italy. <https://pinacotecabrera.org/en/collezione-online/opere/san-rocco-visita-gli-appetati/>

standing and bent over. He appears to be in discussion with a woman who may be beseeching him to help her or the child beside her, as St. Roch is making a hand gesture that may be interpreted as blessing or performing the last rites.

Mary appears to be bestowing her blessing upon St. Roch, as one hand reaches down towards him while the other is directed towards the heavenly

light, a choice that literally reflects her role as a heavenly intercessor, a living channel through which people could pray for help from Christ or God. The significance of color is apparent here as both central figures in the painting are emphasized via the brighter colors with which they are portrayed, while the rest of the painting is composed of dull, muted tones. This gives a sense of despair and hopelessness that is only broken by the figures of St. Roch and the Virgin Mary, whose bright apparel is meant to signify their divinity and the glow of



**Fig. 3:** Bellini, G. (1516). San Giobbe Altarpiece [oil on wood panel]. Gallerie dell'Accademia di Venezia, Venice, Italy. <https://www.gallerieaccademia.it/madonna-col-bambino-trono-angeli-musicanti-e-i-santi-francesco-giovanni-battista-giobbe-domenico>

their blessing. Serving as proof of his survival of the plague by the mercy of God, “Roch’s ritualistic presentation of his ‘wound’ secures, indeed compels, divine favor on behalf of his worshippers”<sup>15</sup>. Bassano’s depiction of St. Roch strengthens such an image, one meant to portray a beacon of hope to the frightened and suffering people at the time.

These solo saints are contrasted by Giovanni Bellini’s *San Giobbe Altarpiece* (Fig. 3), in which both local saints and popular plague saints were given recognition. Although the church that housed this altarpiece was dedicated to Venetian patron saints Job and Bernardino, this altarpiece chooses only to include Saint Job as a sort of compensation, given that most of the church’s visual arts focused on St. Bernardino<sup>16</sup>. The altarpiece is set inside the church, as Mary, with baby Christ on her lap, sits on an elaborate throne while three angels play instruments at her feet. The Virgin Mary is surrounded by St. Francis, John the Baptist, Saint Job, Saint Sebastian, Saint Dominic, and the bishop Louis of Toulouse. What remains unique about Bellini’s work on the altarpiece is his intentional stylization of each individual saint in order to give them a specific purpose that serves to improve the effectiveness of the work in procuring protection from the plague. The inclusion of “. . . Dominic and Francis embody two *exemplum virtutis* of faith, the one expressed by his pious study of the sacred texts, and the other an emotional spirituality that urges our compassion for the Passion of Christ”<sup>17</sup>, and given the injuries of Francis, he “. . . is our irresistible intermediary whose prayers on our behalf cannot be denied precisely because he displays the same wounds as the Crucified Christ, miraculously inflicted by Christ himself”<sup>18</sup>. By choosing which saints to portray in their idealized version, Bellini could be creating a specific formula in order to maximize persuasion by playing into the empathies of the divine. This again is seen in the inclusion of the other saints in the altarpiece, as “Francis, Louis of Toulouse and John the Baptist were evidently considered special champions of belief in the Conception . . . [and] By including Dominic in the S. Giobbe altarpiece, Bellini made the saint yet another witness to Mary’s Immaculacy. . .”<sup>19</sup>. By implementing saints that had a particular connection to both the Virgin Mary and Christ, Bellini creates an association between these saints and more commonly worshiped religious figures that work to promote saintly worship. Specific plague saints are also depicted on the altarpiece, “. . . both Job and Sebastian were considered efficacious intermediaries against the plague”<sup>20</sup>. It is worthwhile to consider the implications of both saints

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15. Marshall, 506.

16. R. Goffen, Bellini, S. Giobbe and Altar Egos. *Artibus Et Historiae* 7, 62 (1986).

17. Goffen, 60.

18. Goffen, 60.

19. Goffen, 66.

20. Goffen, 65.





**Fig. 4:** Reni, G. *Madonna with the Patron Saints of Bologna* [oil on silk]. Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna, Italy. [https://www.pinacotecabologna.beniculturali.it/en/content\\_page/item/2824-madonna-and-child-in-glory-with-saints-petronius-dominic-francis-ignatius-francis-xavier-proculus-and-florian-protectors-of-bologna-plague-altarpiece-or-great-votive-banner](https://www.pinacotecabologna.beniculturali.it/en/content_page/item/2824-madonna-and-child-in-glory-with-saints-petronius-dominic-francis-ignatius-francis-xavier-proculus-and-florian-protectors-of-bologna-plague-altarpiece-or-great-votive-banner)

appearing on the altarpiece, despite serving nearly the same purpose. While St. Sebastian was more widely regarded as a plague saint, the addition of St. Job may have served the purposes of placation, as he “. . . had been deprived of the high altar by Bernardino’s civic cult”<sup>21</sup>. In this altarpiece, the balance almost

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21. Goffen, 65.

shifts to convey that Job has significance to the city of Venice, yet the invocation of the other saints was found to be necessary in order to truly ensure that a stronger cry for help is heard by the Virgin Mary and Christ.

One interesting and notable example of the veneration of local saints in hopes of protection from the plague is Guido Reni's *Pallione del Voto*, or Votive Processional Banner (Fig. 4). Reni created this work to be used in Bologna's public procession in 1631 in order to fulfill the plea from the city's senate "... to the Madonna of the Rosary and to Ignatius of Loyola and Francis Xavier, imploring their intercession and offering in return perpetual acts of collective piety"<sup>22</sup>. On the banner itself, the Virgin Mary is depicted with Christ on her lap as she is surrounded by a bank of clouds with a rainbow underneath her feet, as "Two cherubs prepare to crown the Madonna with a wreath of red and white roses, and three others emerge from the clouds to shower down roses and rosary beads"<sup>23</sup>. Beneath Mary and Christ, "... Reni depicted Bologna's patron saints: kneeling from left to right, Petronius, Francis of Assisi, Francis Xavier, and Dominic; and standing, again from left to right, Ignatius of Loyola, Florian, and Proculus"<sup>24</sup>. Finally, a small cityscape of Bologna is painted at the bottom of the banner. The entire banner grows darker as it reaches the bottom, with colorful and bright divinity shining a small light upon the saints below, and the city remaining dark and gloomy.

The choice to exclude St. Sebastian and St. Roch is an interesting one, given their popularity and intense cult following, all in hopes of salvation. Puglisi remarks that the decision to omit Sebastian and Roch from the painting arose from "... the Reggimento's conscious decision to stress the civic function of the commission"<sup>25</sup>. The motivation behind this decision is largely unknown, whether the Reggimento believed that venerating their local saints would be more effective as these patron saints would be more likely to argue with the higher powers on Bologna's behalf given their special connection to the city, or if by choosing to honor only the patron saints of Bologna, their appreciation would protect them from future disasters as well. Puglisi believes that "Because the *Pallione del Voto* eschews such traditional intercessors in favor of Bologna's patron saints alone, it translates a general plea for heavenly aid into a partisan call"<sup>26</sup>, which aligns with the banner's purpose as a plea for help for only the city of Bologna and the specific manner in which the city's buildings are portrayed.

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22. C. Puglisi, Guido Reni's *Pallione Del Voto* and the Plague of 1630. *The Art Bulletin* 77, 405 (1995).

23. Puglisi, 404.

24. Puglisi, 404.

25. Puglisi, 409.

26. Puglisi, 409.

When considering the presence of any given saint in plague artwork, it is important to keep in mind the motivations of both the artist and possible patrons of the work. The *San Giobbe Altarpiece* (Fig. 3) and *Pallione del Voto* (Fig. 4) are both marked by careful political deliberation that aims to honor important saints while also staying specific to the city. The two aforementioned works were created for use in civic spaces, so it was important that saints extremely loyal to the city were included. However, the inclusion of multiple saints within these works as compared to the paintings solely highlighting St. Roch or St. Sebastian can be explained by “A characteristic feature of early modern plague imagery [with] the multiplicity of options available for obtaining heavenly protection against the disease. Worshippers could pick and choose from a multitude of celestial defenders”<sup>27</sup>. By choosing to identify with one saint or another, or instead worshipping a multitude of saints, people suffering under the plague were able to find protection that was tailored to them and their belonging in a specific city. This idea is spurred on by Marshall, believing “Where one saint was powerful, many gathered together were virtually irresistible. This essentially confident, optimistic conviction in multiple means of accessing supernatural protection was fundamental to early modern men and women’s ability to cope with the ongoing presence of plague in their midst”<sup>28</sup>. This phenomenon does indeed explain the initial widespread use of multiple saints, both local and common saints, as seen in the *San Giobbe Altarpiece* (Fig. 3), but as time went on and plague frequency decreased, the use of this combination also decreased, instead replaced by sole local intercessors praying for the city’s salvation.

While the use of St. Roch and St. Sebastian as distinguished intercessors was extremely prevalent, the two figures served vastly different roles in their inclusion, although both ultimately helped their worshippers procure protection and salvation. St. Sebastian’s martyrdom “. . . by the arrows of the plague becomes a vicarious sacrifice offered up to God. Christ-like, he takes the sins of humanity upon himself and makes restitution for these sins with his own sufferings”<sup>29</sup>. The images of St. Sebastian in such suffering are meant to offer a window of reflection for the viewer, a hope of salvation for their soul in beliefs that they too will be offered redemption in the same way as Christ and Sebastian. Although St. Sebastian appears in his dying moments with severe wounds decorating his body, he is rewarded for his sacrifice, giving comfort to his worshippers that their pain will also be rewarded in death. The depictions of St. Roch are meant to be more awe-inspiring and optimistic, “. . . the sight of Roch scarred by the

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27. L. Marshall. Plague Literature and Art, Early Modern Europe. *Encyclopedia of Pestilence, Pandemics, and Plague* 1, 525 (2008).

28. Marshall, 525.

29. L. Marshall, Manipulating the Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy. *Renaissance Quarterly*, 47, 495 (1994).

plague yet alive and healthy must have been an emotionally charged image of promised cure. Here was literal proof that one could survive the plague, a saint who had triumphed over the disease in his own flesh"<sup>30</sup>. St. Roch was an anomaly, but one welcomed joyously as people triumphed in the fact that survival was possible, that their bodies were capable of fighting this disease in a similar fashion to the saint. As long as they continued to worship and favor Roch, there was hope that the ill would receive the same compassion Roch had received from God.

Given the intense religious fervor at the time of the plague, it was natural that the invocation of saints would be varied throughout different time periods and locations. The common fear of invoking further divine wrath and bringing plague upon a city forced artists and city leaders to consider the implications of honoring some saints while omitting others, leading to a careful balance of divine intercessors that would most benefit the viewers of the work and procure definite protection. While some civic works were meant to procure salvation for the city collective as a whole, more contemplative works featuring Roch and Sebastian were also effective in moving the viewer and offering them various versions of comfort in trying times. Worshippers may have looked toward St. Roch as a source of salvation while they were alive, whereas St. Sebastian offered comfort after suffering and death. The emotive forces at work within saintly depictions guide viewer worship in order to tug at the heartstrings of divine figures in hopes of bodily and religious salvation.

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30. Marshall, 505.





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