

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Marcello Venusti

(Sondrio c. 1512/15 – 1579 Rome)

*Christ Crucified with the  
Madonna, St. John, and Mary  
Magdalene*

after 1550

oil on copper

40 x 30 cm.;

15 3/4 x 11 3/4 in.

---

## Provenance

Private collection, Rome.

---

## Literature

F. Parilla, *Michelangelo a Colori. Marcello Venusti, Lelio Orsi, Marco Pino, Jacopino del Conte*, exh. cat., Rome 2019, pp. 84-87, cat. no. 6, reproduced.

---

## Exhibited

Rome, Palazzo Barberini, Gallerie Nazionali di Arte Antica, 11 October 2019 – 6 January 2020, no. 6.

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



---

LONDON

NEW YORK

MADRID

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

The following catalogue entry is based on a note by Francesca Parrilla, in *Michelangelo a Colori. Marcello Venusti, Lelio Orsi, Marco Pino, Jacopino del Conte*, exh. cat., Rome 2019, pp. 84-87, cat. no. 6, reproduced.

Compared to the more famous *Crucifixions* painted by Marcello Venusti, which were based on three famous drawings by Michelangelo (namely, the *Christ on the Cross* at the British Museum [fig. 1] and the two folios of *Madonna and St. John* at the Louvre [fig. 2]), the present composition sees the addition of Mary Magdalene at the foot of the cross.

From the end of the 1540s onwards, Venusti created an unknown number of variations on this theme, differing in detail but all characterized by vibrant colours and a softer interpretation of the subject of Christ on the Cross as requested by his clients in the aftermath of the Council of Trent, while nevertheless remaining faithful to Michelangelo's designs.

Among Buonarroti's studies on the theme of the Crucifixion with bystanders, there is a sheet preserved in the royal collections at Windsor (inv. 12761, fig. 3) where the figure of the pious woman is faintly sketched, just enough however to identify and arm around the cross and the body crouched on the ground, placed in front of the figure of St. John.

The motif of the woman embracing the cross from below had already been conceived by Michelangelo in drawings generally dated to the 1530s and would be taken up by the Tuscan artist again in a sheet conserved in the British Museum (1895, 0915.510), which scholars consider to be the very last in a series where both the Madonna and St. John hold onto the wood of the cross. It is likely that Michelangelo returned to the idea of including a pious woman in the foreground, as this variation would have been appreciated during the religious turbulence of the Reformation. The cult of Mary Magdalene became highly relevant, even for the secular community, which viewed her as an 'icon of the contemplative life'. The theologian Bernardo Ochino emphasised this interpretation in his *Prediche* (1539 and 1541) and *Dialoghi* (1542). Marquise Vittoria Colonna, who was very close to Michelangelo, also cultivated a particular devotion to Mary Magdalene from the later 1530s and commissioned

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

the two greatest artists of the time, Titian and Michelangelo, to create works depicting the saint. She obtained from the former a panel which is now lost and from the latter a drawing of *Noli me tangere*.

No trace remains, however, of any other more finished studies by Buonarroti dedicated to the holy sinner at the foot of the cross, meaning that the only testimony to Michelangelo's design is probably constituted by Venusti's painting. Here the saint is represented in a theatrical pose, with one arm holding onto the cross and the other arm raised to the sky, as if in dialogue with the movement of the Madonna and the angel on the left. Her presence adds an extremely harmonious element to the composition. Also of interest are the finely rendered auras with small rays behind the crown of thorns. The robe of the Madonna features a thin golden line as well. The two angels sit on clouds resembling marble blocks above Christ's arms. Small drops of blood are added to the perfectly rendered anatomy of Christ's body, indicating wounds from the Flagellation, which are wholly absent from Michelangelo's version.

Considering the existence of other similar versions, the present copper's composition was evidently highly appreciated. One such version can be found in the Cathedral of Santa Maria de la Redonda in Logrono (fig. 4), previously attributed to Michelangelo but recently attributed to a Flemish painter. The work, donated by Bishop Pedro Gonzales de Castillo (d. 1627), is in poor condition, making it difficult to attribute it to a specific artist. Nevertheless, it presents various *pentimenti*, with the most interesting being on the left hand of the Virgin. It reveals that the Madonna, who is now depicted frontally, was initially conceived in profile, as seen in Venusti's most famous *Crucifixions*. It is common to find a frontal depiction of Mary in Michelangelo's corpus, indicating that the author of this work was likely aware of the variants on the theme by Buonarroti. A *pentimento* is also evident in Mary Magdalene's face, which was initially looking upwards, similar to Venusti's work. The Magdalene of the Cathedral of Santa Maria de la Redonda is also depicted with open arms and a vacant look, as if dramatically resigned.

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

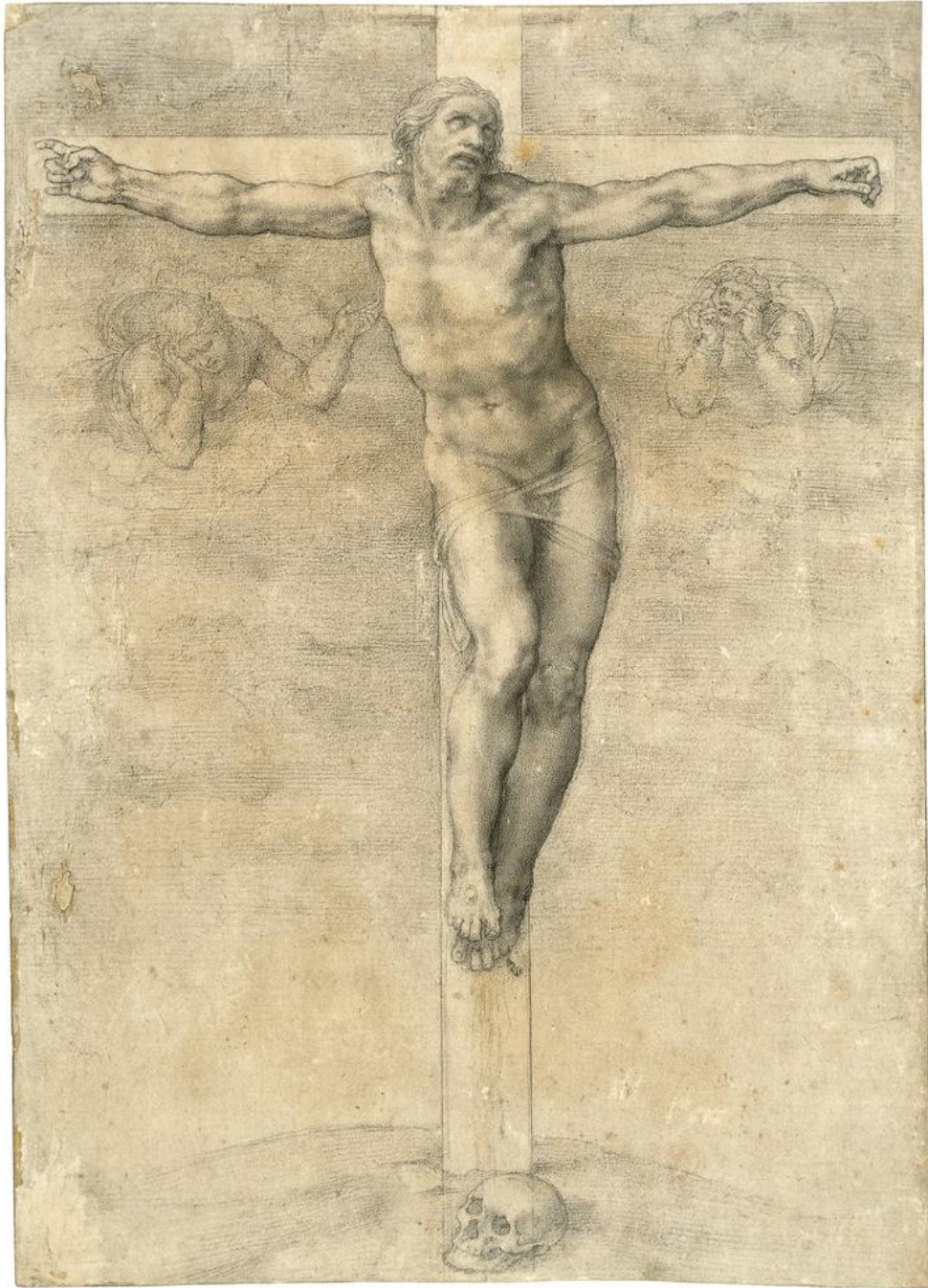
A closer version to the present painting is a canvas in a private collection (42 x 32 cm.) that Venusti painted in his bottega employing the same preparatory cartoon. The only difference are the angels on the clouds. This variant was, however, very successful. For instance, a version exists in the collection of the Comunità of Sant'Egidio in Rome, which derives from this example with the only exception being the Magdalene, that recalls Scipione Pulzone, and the landscape and fine rendering of the clothes, which are indeed closer to a Flemish sensitivity.

Finally, in the collection of the Albani family at Palazzo alle Quattro Fontane, there is a *Christ crucified with the Madonna, St. John, and Mary Magdalene* recorded as a work by Michelangelo. However, it is more likely that it is painted by Venusti. By looking at the inventories, we can infer that it was given to Pope Albani by Guido Ubaldo Salamanni (d. 1728) together with a drawing of a Crucifix. Salamanni, who was from the Marche region, worked at the Nunciature of Madrid from 1709 and in the 1720s was sent to Assisi and Rimini, where he died in 1728.

Biographers Giorgio Vasari and Giovanni Baglione inform us that Venusti gained fame for his ability to paint '*cose piccole*' (small things). This is evident when we consider the variety of versions he created on this theme, most of which were likely executed for private devotion, even though Pope Paul IV Carafa (1556) was against the widespread dissemination of the image of Christ alive on the cross.

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



**Figure 1.** Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Christ on the Cross*.  
British Museum, London

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



**Figure 2.** Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The Virgin Mary; Saint John The Evangelist.*  
Louvre Museum, Paris

# COLNAGHI

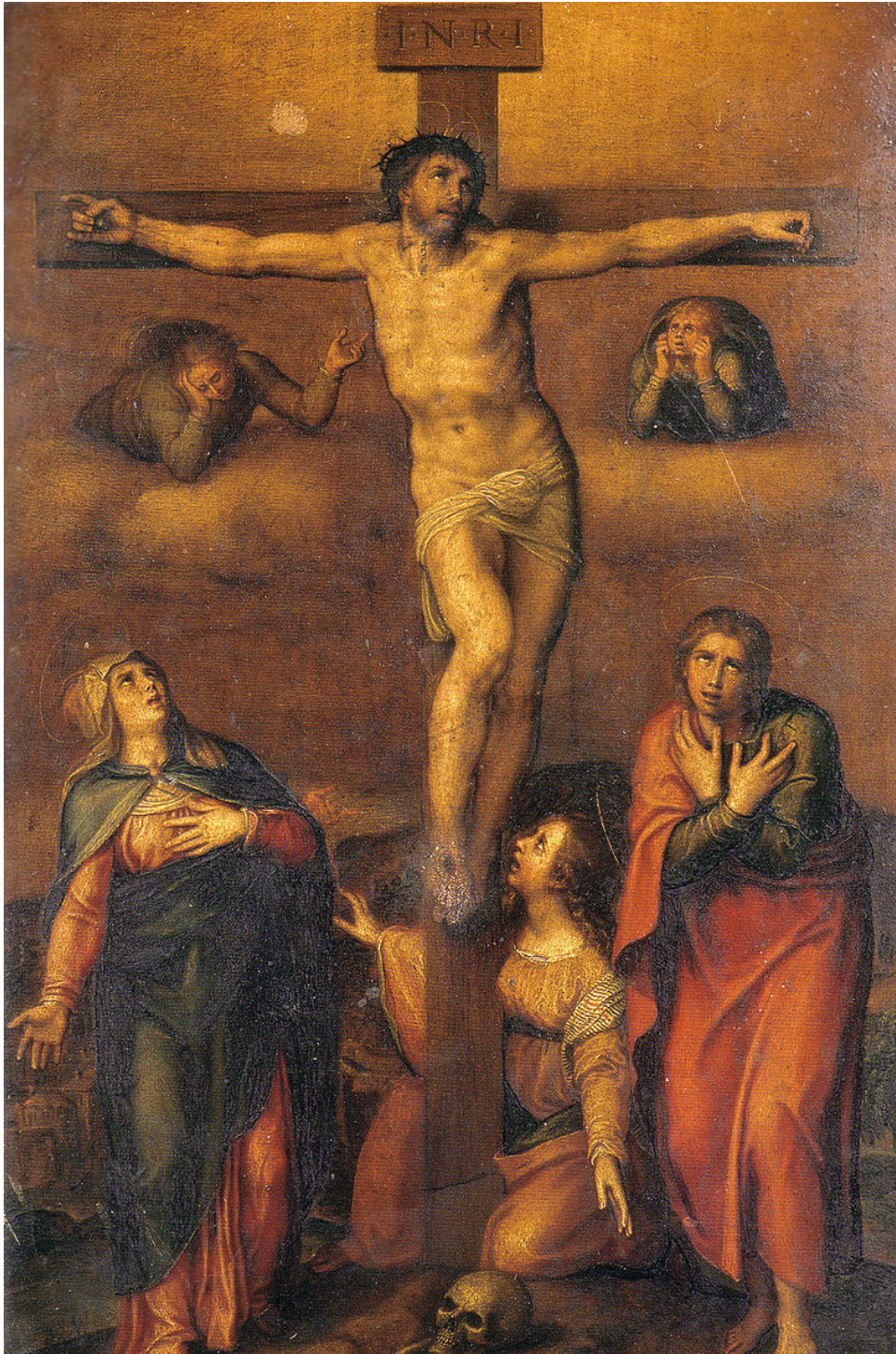
Est. 1760



**Figure 3.** Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The Crucifixion*.  
Royal Collection, Windsor

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



**Figure 4.** After Marcello Venusti, *The Crucifixion*.  
Santa Maria de la Redonda Cathedral, Logrono