Copying from the Old Masters. Raphael “à la française”: The *Holy Family with a Sparrow* and its Copies by Philippe de Champaigne and Jean Baptiste Corneille

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Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1654), Saint Catherine of Alexandria, c. 1627–30(?). Oil on canvas, 90 × 75.4 cm. Purchased with funds from a donor who wishes to remain anonymous 2019. Nationalmuseum, NM 7538

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Copying from the Old Masters. Raphael “à la française”: The Holy Family with a Sparrow and its Copies by Philippe de Champaigne and Jean Baptiste Corneille
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Although he only lived to the age of 37, Raphael (1483–1520) was a prolific painter and draughtsman. His graphic oeuvre consists of hundreds of drawings, generally thought to be a mere 10 per cent of his output in this medium. In his drawing practice, Raphael has long been characterised as pragmatic and utilitarian, since most of his sketches investigate solutions that are ultimately realised in a final design, be it a fresco, panel painting, altarpiece, tapestry or print. This may explain why Raphael’s graphic oeuvre has expanded and contracted over time, in concert with periodic revisions of his paintings.1 Additionally, this phenomenon raises fascinating questions with regard to those compositions that are recorded only on paper. An interesting case in point is the composition known as the Holy Family with a Sparrow, whose attribution to Raphael has traditionally been based on a drawing, now held at the Louvre. Several engravings (some crediting Raphael with the invention) and paintings (some anciently attributed to Raphael) that correspond to the Louvre drawing exist. However, since all known paintings seem to be of the 17th century, or later, it has been concluded that Raphael never finalised this composition in a painting. In this article, I will argue that this

Fig. 1 Gilles Rousselet (1610–1686), The Holy Family with a Sparrow. Department of Prints and Photography, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, ED-40 (B)-FOL.
Conclusion is not entirely accurate. Based on a comparative analysis of two copies attributed to Philippe de Champaigne (1602–1674) and Jean Baptiste Corneille (1649–1695), I will present new evidence connecting the *Holy Family with a Sparrow* to a painted Raphaelesque model, which can in fact be identified through old photographs.

In his *Abecedario*, Pierre-Jean Mariette (1694–1774) mentions two engravings of the *Holy Family with a Sparrow*. The first, by Gilles Rousselet (1610–1686), is described as a good “imitation” of Raphael’s manner, as seen in the painting mentioned by Vasari in the house of Lorenzo Nasi (fig. 1). The second, attributed to Jean Alix (b. 1615), is said to have been modelled after a small painting by the obscure artist Henry Bommar (sic), most likely Henri Blomaers (c. 1625–c. 1663/5), the son-in-law of the French artist Nicolas de Plattemontagne (1631–1706). According to Mariette, the painting on which Alix modelled his engraving was based on a drawing by Philippe de Champaigne, who in turn had copied a drawing by Raphael, then in the collection of the Cologne banker, art collector and patron Everhard Jabach (1618–1695). This drawing is now held at the Louvre; its attribution to Raphael, however, has been questioned since Mariette’s time and was reaffirmed only more recently (fig. 2).

The authorship of the Louvre drawing has been argued based on a comparison with another sheet, now held at Windsor Castle, whose attribution to Raphael has never been questioned (fig. 3). Both sheets have been dated to the same period and even tentatively connected to the same project, as preliminary ideas for the design of the Canigiani *Holy Family*. However, the only passage identical in both drawings and painting is the upper body of the Madonna, while the other figures are different in all but their general arrangement. Furthermore, the composition recorded in the Louvre drawing is distinguished by a unique feature, i.e. the presence of a little bird (possibly a sparrow rather than a goldfinch), which is being held out by the Baptist to the Christ Child. This detail qualifies the Louvre drawing as a study for an independent composition on the theme of the “Holy Family with a Sparrow”. Whether this composition was ever finalised by Raphael in a painting has remained an open question.

In 1983, Martine Vasselin suggested that Rousselet’s engraving might have been copied from a painting by Philippe de Champaigne, which is listed in the inventory of the artist’s estate drafted after his death, on 17 August 1674: “n. 22, Item, une copie d’une petite Vierge où Saint Jean présente un oysseau à Nostre Seigneur après Raphaël, prisé 60 l.” The whereabouts of this painting remained unknown until a small panel matching the description appeared on the art market and was published.
Champaigne – who never made the trip to Italy – had studied Raphael's drawing when it was still in the Jabach collection, and while remaining entirely faithful to the disposition of the figures, imaginatively completed the composition, integrating the Holy Family into a fully developed landscape setting “that is entirely original, and among the most beautiful of his career”. This has led to the conclusion that “the present painting is not a copy in the usual sense of the word; rather it is a creative copy, in which Champaigne translated and interpreted Raphael’s design into the finished painting that the Renaissance master himself had never undertaken”.

The notion of “creative copy” is certainly appropriate in this context, considering what is known about Champaigne’s own attitude towards the act of copying. As one of the instigators of the classical tendency, and founders of the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, Champaigne exhorted artists to avoid the risk of becoming “a copyist of manner” (one who imitates neither nature nor painting, but a style of a painting). In light of these ideas, it is not surprising that Champaigne would provide his own interpretation of Raphael’s design. What seems to require further explanation is the vast circulation that Champaigne’s version of the Holy Family with a Sparrow enjoyed, as indicated by the numerous copies listed in the literature. Why did Champaigne’s painting become an authoritative substitute for Raphael’s original design? An interesting case in point is provided by a small panel, now held at the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm (fig. 5), which was formerly part of the Royal Museum (Kongl. Museum), where it was listed as a work by Raphael. This painting can now be recognised as a copy modelled after Champaigne’s version of the Holy Family with a Sparrow. The comparison between the two works is very instructive, as it highlights the complex intricacies involved in the act of copying. In fact, the author of the Stockholm painting can be plausibly identified as the painter and printmaker Jean Baptiste Corneille. This is suggested by the information included in the old inventories, which make it possible to trace back the provenance of the painting to the collections of Eva Bielke (1706–1778) and Carl Gustaf Tessin (1695–1770), as well as by the stylistic analysis. While faithfully

Fig. 3 Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio, 1483–1520), The Virgin and Child with St. Elizabeth and the Infant St. John. Some black chalk underdrawing, pen and pale ink, a little retouching in black ink, 23.4 × 18.0 cm. Royal Collection Trust, Windsor Castle, Windsor, RCIN 912738.
replicating Champaigne’s composition, Corneille provides his own interpretation of the artist’s fully classicising vocabulary. This is evident in the sharper traits of the head of the Madonna, as well as in the skin tones, which shift toward a copper tone that diverges from the enameled finish and high-keyed palette favoured by Champaigne. The leaves and the foliage of the vegetation behind Saint Elizabeth are depicted in a sketchy and approximate way that resembles the style of Corneille’s pen drawings. Furthermore, Corneille seems to have carefully studied the position of the highlights, in order to give more brilliance to the contrasts of lights and shadows, both in the drapery and in the figures (particularly in the hair of the Madonna and of both John the Baptist and Christ). This may suggest that Corneille also had access to Raphael’s drawing in the Jabach collection. It has been noted in fact that Raphael’s drawing may have been retouched with white gouache by a later hand, tentatively identified by Goguel as that of Michel II Corneille (1642–1708), Jean Baptiste’s elder brother.17 It is well known that Jabach made astute use of young holders of the Prix de Rome, employing them as painters, engravers and even restorers. When Jean Baptiste Corneille received the Academy prize in 1663, he was only 14 or 15 years old and may thus have been a little too young to be employed for such a delicate and sustained task.18 Mariette, however, does mention him as one of the draughtsmen in Jabach’s service.19 Therefore, the hypothesis that Jean Baptiste Corneille may have studied, and perhaps even retouched, Raphael’s drawing before the sale of the Jabach collection to Louis XIV in 1671 seems, all things considered, plausible. Whether this might also suggest that Corneille copied Champaigne’s version of the Holy Family with a Sparrow during the same period, and before leaving for Rome, in 1665, is more difficult to say. It could also be suggested that Corneille had access to Champaigne’s painting after his return from Italy in 1674.20 Interestingly, that year would coincide with the death of Philippe de Champaigne, and thus with his consecration as “a good and Christian painter”, in light of the praise he received from the Jansenist theologians. Evidently, the dating of Corneille’s copy depends not only on the chronological assessment of Champaigne’s version of the Holy Family with a Sparrow, but also on a consideration of the context in which the painting was executed, displayed and made accessible.

In the lot essay accompanying the sale, Champaigne’s version of the Holy Family with a Sparrow is dated around 1660 on stylistic grounds, by comparison with the
four large landscapes with episodes from the Lives of the Saints made for Anne of Austria in 1656, and with the great Christ Healing the Blind, dated c. 1655–60. This hypothesis has been formulated on the assumption that the landscape setting of the Holy Family with a Sparrow was fully invented by Champaigne. A thorough investigation amongst the other copies and derivations of the composition suggests that this is not the case. The evidence is provided by an old photograph of a painting formerly included in the collection of the Chicago railway magnate Charles Tyson Yerkes (1837–1905), where it was kept under the name of Raphael (fig. 6). At first glance, the Yerkes painting could appear identical to Champaigne’s version. Indeed, the provenance of the former was erroneously attached to the latter in the lot essay that accompanied the sale. However, upon closer inspection it seems clear that the two paintings differ in certain details: for example, the wooden fence behind Saint Elizabeth and the rustic cottage with smoke coming out of the chimney, in the top right corner, are only included in Champaigne’s version. For the rest, the landscape setting is identical in both paintings and seems to have the richness of the Holy Families produced by Raphael later in his career with the collaboration of his workshop. The fragmentary arch that appears in the background, behind the Madonna, as well as the pyramid emerging from the horizon at a longer distance, towards the centre, are reminiscent of the ancient monuments or ruins displayed in late works such as the Virgin with Blue Diadem, whose attribution is contended between Raphael and Giovanni Francesco Penni. The comparison with the Yerkes painting shows that Champaigne did not invent the landscape, but rather adapted a pre-existing composition, which he surely considered to be by Raphael. When and where Champaigne would have had access to the painted model (the Yerkes painting or a similar version) is hard to say. The only information on the earlier provenance of the Yerkes painting is provided by the sale catalogues, which refer to a “Crossibili de Ferrara” family and to a Prince Paskewich (sic) as the previous owners. The painting was later acquired as a work of Raphael by “Mrs. J.W.R. Cardoza”, i.e. the Philadelphia philanthropist Charlotte Drake Martinez Cardeza (1854–1939), best known in her own time as one of the survivors of the Titanic. An engraving by Jacob Matham, dated 1607 and inscribed with the name of the Flemish artist M. de Boijs or Mathieu Dubus (c. 1590–1665/6), shows the same figural group, in reverse, inserted in a different setting, possibly suggesting that a similar composition was accessible in the
southern Netherlands. Philippe de Champaigne was born in Brussels and presumably returned to his native city on several occasions (at least one trip is documented, in 1654). Thus, he may have had the opportunity to encounter a painting of the “Holy Family with a Sparrow” on one of his trips.

As mentioned earlier, Champaigne’s painting is listed in the artist’s estate shortly after his death, on 17 August 1674. This may suggest that the painting was kept in his workshop and was thus accessible to his students and collaborators. However, in a letter addressed to Jean Baptiste Champaigne, Philippe’s nephew, on 12 December 1674 (a few months after the artist’s death), the Catholic priest and theologian of the Jansenist school, Martin de Barcos (1600–1678), claims that he was in possession of a “petite copie d’une tableau de Titien que feu M. votre oncle me fit faire autrefois, où saint Jean Baptiste est représenté comme un enfant se jouant avec Jésus-Christ et faisant voler un petit oiseau.” While the reference to Titian is a little puzzling, it seems that Barcos is indeed talking of the Holy Family with a Sparrow. The confusion about the name of the artist (Titian instead of Raphael) may simply indicate that Barcos was not paying attention to the attribution, but rather to the subject matter, which in fact he discusses at length in the same letter. While recalling his longstanding acquaintance with Philippe de Champaigne and highly praising his works, Barcos speaks of the Holy Family with a Sparrow in less complimentary terms: “J’ai peine de regarder cette petite image, parce qu’elle déshonore ces deux grands saints [the Infant John the Baptist and Christ] et la doctrine de l’Église qui nous apprend .... Il est certain aussi qu’ils ne se sont jamais vus durant l’enfance, et que saint Jean n’a connu Jésus-Christ visiblement que lorsqu’il a vu descendre le Saint-Esprit en forme de colombe, selon l’Évangéliste.” Barcos is here referring to the fact that no encounter between the Christ Child and the Infant John the Baptist is recorded in Holy Scripture. Although it became a well-established artistic convention by the 15th and 16th centuries, the origins of this episode are to be found in the Meditations of the Pseudo-Bonaventura, a text written in the late Middle Ages. The criticism expressed by Barcos should thus be considered within the larger context of the Jansenist “artistic doctrine”, which prompted artists to faithfully represent events from the Scriptures, adopting only genuine formal means to convince the viewer about the truthfulness of the message conveyed by the painting. In this sense,
Barcos recalls the famous lecture delivered by Philippe de Champaigne on 7 January 1668, when he dared to reproach Nicolas Poussin for providing an incorrect interpretation of sacred subject matter in the painting Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well. According to Barcos, Champaigne reproached Poussin not only for desacralising a religious painting, but also for making it look pagan, which could have been a result of Poussin’s extended stay in Italy. Early modern Italian paintings were often criticised for featuring a profusion of redundant spectacular details, so that the achievements of French painters could stand out as more praiseworthy in comparison with them. However, such explicit objections were hardly to be found in Philippe de Champaigne’s lecture, which may suggest that Barcos had put his own opinions in his mouth. The lecture given by Champaigne at the Academy became a sort of testament. His message gained popularity thanks to the sacred scene with an increased sense of truth, which the viewers of the time would certainly have appreciated.

Notes:
3. For an entry on this engraving, see Raphaël et l’art français, Paris 1983, cat. no. 319, pp. 217–281 (ill. 19); V. Meyer, L’euvre gravé de Gilles Rousselet, graveur parisien du XVIIe siècle: Catalogue général, Paris 2004, pp. 110–111, cat. no. 22 (as d’après Raphael?). Meyer suggests a date between 1650 and 1665, which, as will be explained later, should be slightly postponed, to after 1660. As noted by Meyer, the identification of this engraving with the plate dated 1650, mentioned by Heinecken, remains uncertain.
4. This painting is unanimously identified as the so-called Madonna del cardellino or Madonna of the Goldfinch (Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence), usually dated to c. 1505–06. Here, John is holding out a goldfinch to the Christ Child, who is standing between Mary’s knees. Saint Elizabeth is not included, and the arrangement of the figures is different from that seen in the engraving. It must be concluded, therefore, that Mariette was probably referring to Raphael’s Madonna del cardellino in terms of style and subject matter, not as the actual prototype for the engraving.
5. The print attributed to Jean Alix is known in two states, both included in the collections of the Department of Prints and Drawings of the British Museum: the first (inv. no. V.5.7) is inscribed with the letters “R.V.B.,” which could indeed refer to Raphael; although in a later state (inv. no. 1891,0414.772), published in 1725, these initials are replaced by an inscription that gives the composition to Rubens. The curator’s comments refer to the composition reproduced in the engraving as “unidentified”.
6. Mariette (Abecedario, p. 277) refers to “Bommar” as the brother-in-law of Montaigne, i.e. Nicolas de Plattemontagne (1631–1706). A painter named Henri Blomaers is known to have married Nicolas’s sister Françoise, so it seems likely that the name Bommar refers to him. It should be noted that Mariette relies on second-hand information provided by Philippe Vleughels (1619–1694), who married Plattemontagne’s other sister, Catherine. Françoise de Plattemontagne remarried in 1668 with Louis Bost, presumably following the death of her first husband. Philippe de Champaigne appears as a witness in the marriage contract. For this information, see À l’école de Philippe de Champaigne, D. Brême (ed.), Paris and Evreux 2007, pp. 132, 138. I was unable to find further information on Henri Blomaers or on works attributed to him.
7. Alte Pinakothek, Munich, inv. 476. Usually dated between 1506 and 1508, as the painting may have been commissioned to celebrate the wedding of Domenico Canigiani and Lucrezia di Girolamo Frescobaldi, which took place in 1507. For an entry on the Canigiani Holy Family, see J. Meyer zur Capellen, Raphael: A Critical Catalogue of his Paintings. Volume I: The Beginnings in Umbria and Florence, ca. 1500–1508, Münster 2001, pp. 227–232, cat. no. 30. As noted by Meyer zur Capellen, the Louvre drawing may be regarded as a first step, but not as a preparatory sketch for the Canigiani Holy Family.
9. According to Paul Joannides, a small painting with this composition by Raphael “presumably existed, for several replicas are known”. On the other hand, Martin Clayton, and others, concluded that all known paintings “seem to be of the seventeenth century or later” and are probably derived “from one or other of the engravings, in turn based on the Louvre drawing or some variant of that sheet”. See P. Joannides, The Drawings of Raphael, with a Complete Catalogue, Berkeley–Los Angeles 1983, p. 170, cat. nos. 150, 151 (both as Raphael); M. Clayton, Raphael and his Circle: Drawings from Windsor Castle, London 1999, pp. 59–61, cat. no. 13 (as Raphael).
12. For the lot essay, see the online version published here: https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5567028 (accessed 3 September 2021).
13. In a famous lecture, delivered at the Academy in June 1672, Champaigne discussed this topic extensively, providing specific examples of the process of imitation as an active selection from the best models: he invited students to choose “the works of Raphael for the imitation of ideal nature and correct drawing, and the works of Titian for the agreeable union of colours”. For the text of the
lecture, *De l’éducation de la jeunesse suivant son génie naturel* (*Contre les copistes des manières*), *see* *Conférences inédites de l’Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture*, Paris [1903].

14. A partial list of copies is provided in the entry by D. Cordellier and B. P. *in Raphael, son atelier, ses copistes*, 1992, pp. 78–80, cat. no. 70. Through images I was able to verify that the landscape appears identical in the following cases: oil on canvas, oval format, attr. Pierre Mignard (private collection, United Kingdom); oil on canvas, glued on panel, attr. Giovanni Francesco Penni (sale, Munich, Hamps, 26 June 2009); oil on panel attr. to the circle of Jacques Stella (sale, Monaco, Sotheby’s, 21–22 June 1991); oil on copper attr. to an anonymous artist of the late 17th or early 18th century (sale, London, Sotheby’s, 12 September 2018). Passavant also mentions a painting attributed to Nicolas Poussin, then in the possession of M. Amsinck in Hamburg, and one, of lower quality, from the monastery of Santa Chiara in Urbino, in which he claims more figures are added (I have been unable to trace images of these two paintings).

15. NM Arkiv, Kongl. Museum, vol. 11, inv. 1861, no. 320. The same inventory number (KM 320) appears on the back of the panel, alongside the one still in use today, NMDrh 284, referring to the transfer of the painting to Drottningholm. The old label inscribed with the number KM 430, on the back of the frame at the bottom left corner, must refer to another painting (NM 171), which is also listed as a work of the school of Raphael in the 1861 inventory. As part of a project researching the Italian paintings, the Nationalmuseum is taking a closer look at three copies after Raphael which are part of the collections; two of them represent famous compositions, namely *La Belle Jardinière* (NMBbg 94) and *La Madonna della Seggiola* (NMDrh 124), while the prototype of the third one *The Holy Family with a Sparrow* (NMDrh 284) was until now unknown. An extended entry for this painting will be published as part of the project’s results.

16. KB, Åkeröarkivet, L82,2,3 (inv. 1757, f. 316); L82,2,7 (inv. 1761–1763, f. 498); L82,2,3 (inv. 1763, f. 851). The painting is here attributed to Jean Baptiste Corneille and is described as “S.a Maria med barnet Jesus, S.a Anna och S. Johannes” (*The Virgin Mary with the Christ Child, Saint Anne and Saint John*); the confusion between Saint Elizabeth and Saint Anne was not so uncommon, especially in descriptions included in inventories or sales catalogues. The painting was bought in Paris in 1750 by Eva Bielke and passed to Tessin (possibly as a gift); it subsequently appears in the sale that took place on 16 February 1771, following Tessin’s death (published in F. Sander, *Nationalmuseum: Bidrag till Tidigaregalleriets historia*, vol. 1, 1966, p. 62). Magnus Olausson, who has read a draft of this article, has kindly made aware that Roger de Robelin provided a similar reconstruction of the provenance of this painting in an unpublished note, confirming the link with Tessin’s collection.


18. This is Goguel’s opinion (see previous note).


20. After his return from Rome, Jean Baptiste worked on several religious paintings; in the late 1670s he was involved in the decoration of the Hôtel Royal des Invalides, together with his brother. His late years (1680s–1690s) mark a shift, from a nervous and very personal character to a more stereotyped language.


22. The painting is in fact illustrated in the 1893 catalogue of the Yerkes collection and is also discussed in an article by Frederic George Stephens, *Pre-Raphaelite critic and art historian; see Catalogue from Collection of Charles T. Yerkes*, Chicago 1893, no. 44; and F. G. Stephens, “Mr. Yerkes’ collection at Chicago: the old masters – I”, in *Magazine of Art*, Jan. 1895, pp. 96–101. In both publications, the *Holy Family with a Sparrow* is presented as a work that undoubtedly belongs to Raphael or his school; the execution, surface and touch of the painting, as well as the charm of the design and the small format, are all considered elements favouring such an attribution and suggesting a dating of around 1504–6.

23. See lot essay mentioned in note 22.


25. The name Crossibilli could possibly refer to the Costabili family of Ferrara, while the name Paskevitch may in fact be related to Ivan Paskevich (1602–1674), an Imperial Russian military leader. His son Fedor (1823–1903) published a catalogue of the family collection in which there is no reference to a painting that could match this one (I would like to thank Iana Sokolova for kindly checking this information for me and for helping me to identify Paskevitch).

26. The widow of James W. M. Cardeza, Philadelphia attorney, and daughter of the late Thomas Drake, attorney, and daughter of the late Thomas Drake, banker and industrialist, she lived in Montebello and was survived by her son, Thomas D. M. Cardeza. This information comes from an obituary published in the *New York Times*, Wednesday 2 August 1939.


29. Following the reference provided by the 1674 inventory of the artist’s estate, very little is known about the subsequent whereabouts of Philippe de Champaigne’s *Holy Family with a Sparrow*. The same work appears in the inventory of Philippe’s nephew, the artist Jean Baptiste de Champaigne (1631–1681), dated 29 October 1681, where it is listed as “une copie d’apres Raphael d’une Vierge et d’un petit Jésus tenant un oiseau, prisée 40 l.”; see Guiffrey, “Les peintres Philippe et Jean-Baptiste de Champaigne: Nouveaux documents et inventaires après décès”, in *Nouvelles Archives de l’Art Français*, 1892, 3rd series, VIII, p. 197.


31. Ibid.


33. Champaigne had criticised Poussin for not painting camels, despite the fact that, according to Scripture, it was the need to water the animals that brought Eliezer to the well from which Rebecca was drawing water. Instead, Poussin featured that brought Eliezer to the well from which Rebecca was drawing water. Instead, Poussin featured...