COLNAGHI



Federico Barocci
Head of Saint John the Evangelist, ca. 1607–1608

FEDERICO BAROCCI
(Urbino c. 1533 – 1612)

HEAD OF SAINT JOHN THE EVANGELIST, After 1582, possibly c. 1607-1608

Oil on paper, laid down on canvas
39.4 x 29.9 cm; 15 ½ x 11 ¾ in.

Provenance

Private Collection, Spain;
Christie's, New York, 28 January 2009, lot 65, as Federico Barocci;
Private collection.

Literature

Emiliani 2008, vol. 1, pp. 369-370, no. 39.34; Bohn and Mann 2012, p. 167, cat. 8.11; Marciari 2013, p. 523.

Exhibitions

Saint Louis, Saint Louis Art Museum, Federico Barocci: Renaissance Master, 21 October 2012 – 20 January 2013;

London, National Gallery, Barocci: Brilliance and Grace, 27 February – 19 May 2013, cat. 8.11.
Private collection.



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Federico Barocci, born in Urbino around 1533, became one of the most successful painters in central Italy during the second half of the sixteenth century. Devoted chiefly to large religious compositions, he brought drawing and painting into close dialogue through his investigation of colour and light. Working principally in his native city, he shaped its artistic culture and influenced successive generations of followers. His formation brought the local inheritance of Raphael and Piero della Francesca into contact with the more recent examples of Francesco Menzocchi and Battista Franco, while his engagement with Correggio and his exchanges with Taddeo and Federico Zuccaro opened further possibilities for colour, movement, and expression. A persistent experimenter in etching and pastel, he also developed a sustained dialogue between graphic study and pictorial execution. Increasingly refined studies culminated in a full-scale cartoon, which served both to transfer the design and to preserve the invention for subsequent reuse.[1]

Oil on paper held a particular place within this practice. From his early maturity into his final decades, Barocci employed it for figure studies, portraits, and independent pictorial inventions. Earlier experiments by artists such as Lorenzo Lotto, and Domenico Beccafumi's related work in oil and tempera, offered precedents, but Barocci gave painted studies on paper unusual consistency and expressive range. Their combination of colour, modelling, and graphic immediacy anticipated concerns that would become central to the oil sketch in the following century.[2]

Surviving works, studio inventories, and early collecting records make his use of the medium one of the best-documented instances in Renaissance Italy. Edmund Pillsbury's pioneering study of 1978 established a basis for its modern investigation, bringing together new examples and examining their relationship to Barocci's paintings and pastels. Subsequent scholarship has expanded the corpus and sharpened the distinction between preparatory studies, repetitions, and autonomous works.[3]

The present head occupies a particularly revealing place within this production. Related to Saint John supporting Christ's feet in the *Entombment of Christ* at Senigallia, it combines a clear dependence on the altarpiece with considerable freedom of execution. Its relationship to another oil on paper of the same subject in Washington has prompted opposing interpretations: an autograph variant, perhaps intended for a collector, or a repetition by another hand. Technical examination and

[1] Marciari and Verstegen 2008, pp. 291-321; Verstegen 2019; Baroni 2022, pp. 305-306.

[2] Pillsbury 1978, pp. 170-173; Prytz 2011, pp. 653-656.

[3] Pillsbury 1978, pp. 170-173; Prytz 2011, pp. 653-656; Bohn 2012, pp. 49-52; Freeman Bauer and Bauer 1999, pp. 520-530.

a renewed comparison of the related works provide grounds for reconsidering both its authorship and its purpose.

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The *Entombment* (fig. 1) was commissioned in 1579 by the Confraternita del Santissimo Sacramento e della Croce and completed in 1582 for its church in Senigallia, where it remains. Following the *Deposition* for Perugia Cathedral and the *Madonna del Popolo* for Arezzo, it belongs to the period in which Barocci secured his reputation beyond his native Urbino. Some fifty surviving drawings document the development of its composition, figures, lighting, and expression. Associated oil studies include the head of Nicodemus in New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (inv. 1976.87.1), Saint John in Washington, the National Gallery of Art (inv. 1979.11.1), identical in subject to the one considered here, and Mary Magdalen in Bayonne, Musée Bonnat-Helleu (inv. RF 1997.3).

The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, preserves a small compositional study in black chalk and oil on oiled paper (inv. 85.GG.26, fig. 2). Interestingly, the composition is worked out in grisaille, while the figures' faces are heightened with pink, an effect that Barocci may have reproduced at full scale by juxtaposing or attaching to the painted preparatory cartoon (now lost) pastel or oil-on-paper studies of the individual heads, each executed at the same 1:1 scale as the corresponding figure in the final painting. A more finished reduced version of the whole composition in a private collection is painted on canvas; its function as either a preparatory work or a subsequent *ricordo* remains disputed.[4]

The painting discussed here, recorded as coming from a Spanish private collection, appeared on the Paris art market in October 2007. On that occasion, its attribution to Barocci was confirmed by Andrea Emiliani in a letter based on photographs; a further positive attribution was provided by Nicholas Turner on 16 September 2008.[5] Later that same year, the previously unpublished work was included by Emiliani in the third edition of his catalogue raisonné of Barocci.[6] Interpreting the painting as preparatory for the *Entombment*, Emiliani emphasized its passionate, almost Romantic character, evident both in its chromatic range and in the inventive treatment of the dramatically dishevelled hair. He suggested that, in the final painting, Barocci deliberately tempered these features in favour of a more harmonious, Raphael-inspired conception.

[4] Emiliani 1992, pp. 9-46; Bohn and Mann 2012, pp. 158-181, cats. 8.9-8.15.

[5] The documents relating to Emiliani's attribution are preserved in the Federico Barocci Archive of Andrea Emiliani, currently in the custody of the author of this entry.

[6] Emiliani 2008, I, pp. 369-370, no. 39.34.

On 28 January 2009, the work was offered at Christie's, New York, with a catalogue entry by Nicholas Turner, who regarded its greater spontaneity as evidence that it preceded the Washington version, the two heads representing successive refinements of the same motif.[7] The painting attracted considerable attention and established a new auction record for Barocci, selling for more than four times the low estimate, including buyer's premium. It was later included in the 2012 – 13 exhibition at the Saint Louis Art Museum and the National Gallery, London. In the accompanying volume of studies, Babette Bohn and Judith W. Mann proposed a different sequence, arguing that the more controlled handling of the present head was more likely to postdate the Washington study. They nevertheless left open whether it should be understood as a further stage in the preparatory process or as an independent replica made for a collector.[8]

John Marciari questioned the attribution in his review of the exhibition. Having compared the present work and the Washington version directly with the original altarpiece, as well as with other oils on paper by Barocci included in the exhibition, he suggested that three of the exhibited works on paper, including the present head, were "not by Barocci, and probably not even by his workshop".[9] He did not, however, propose an alternative attribution, geographical context, or more specific later date. His objection nevertheless raised a fundamental question: must differences between treatments of the same head indicate different authors, or can they reflect distinct intentions and phases within Barocci's practice?[10]

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The present reassessment draws on the set of high-resolution photographs of the Senigallia altarpiece taken by Gilberto Urbinati in 2023, direct examination of the painting during the Barocci exhibition in Urbino in 2024, and the diagnostic examination of the present head by Scientific Analysis of Fine Art, LLC (SAFA), executed in April 2025. SAFA employed Fourier-transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR), Raman spectroscopy, X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy (XRF), optical microscopy, and scanning electron microscopy (SEM) to investigate the binding medium, pigments, varnish, and paper fibres. Infrared imaging and X-radiography

[7] Christie's, *Important Old Master Paintings and Sculpture*, sale cat. (New York: Christie's, 28 January 2009), lot 65, "Federico Barocci, Head of Saint John the Evangelist, an Oil Study for The Entombment of Christ in the Church of Santa Croce, Senigallia."

[8] Bohn and Mann 2012, p. 167.

[9] Marciari 2013, p. 523. Another of the works questioned in Marciari's review, a *Study for the Head of Saint Francis*, entered the Saint Louis Art Museum in December 2019 as a work by Barocci, through the gift of Jon and Barbara Landau (inv. 238:2019; see Saint Louis Art Museum 2020).

[10] A third oil-on-paper version of Saint John's head came to the author's attention in a private collection in 2021 and remains under study.

examined the composition. Two microsamples, taken from the yellow garment and the brown-black background, were also studied in cross-section under visible and ultraviolet light to investigate the layer structure.[11]

The medium was identified as a drying oil, with FTIR results consistent with linseed oil. Lead white occurs throughout the composition, together with lead carboxylates associated with oil paint containing lead. The palette includes yellow and red ochres, umber and sienna pigments, vermilion, a lead oxide yellow identified as massicot or litharge, and plant-derived carbon black. Quartz, kaolinite, calcium carbonate, and gypsum were also detected. Some results suggest natural black chalk, although the presence of similar minerals in the earth pigments prevents a definitive identification. Zinc was associated with the lining canvas rather than an anachronistic zinc white; trace titanium was attributed to mineral pigments rather than modern titanium white.[12] Microscopic examination revealed fibre morphology consistent with flax. The report therefore regards the paper, like the other materials identified, as compatible with sixteenth-century practice. A natural resin varnish, possibly dammar, was also detected, without a determination of its age or whether it was applied by the artist. Taken together, these findings are consistent with materials and practices available in Italy in the sixteenth century.

Infrared imaging and X-radiography revealed no significant changes beyond those visible at the surface (fig. 3). They nevertheless reveal areas of thinning paint around the right eye and brow, the right cheek and chin, and along the hairline, which in the present author's view may be interpreted as the result of an old loss or reduction of the superficial paint layer. Judging from the visible evidence alone, this effect could also be the consequence of an earlier, overly aggressive cleaning of the work, whose oil-on-paper support is inherently fragile. In these areas, slight subsequent restoration and retouching may have altered the present aesthetic appearance of the head to some extent, contributing to the stronger, more "romantic" effect – Andrea Emiliani's term – that also distinguishes it visually from the Washington version. Microscopic examination of the cross-section from the yellow garment suggests a possible white preparatory layer, followed by a black layer and the final yellow paint. The discontinuous black particles were not considered characteristic of an underdrawing. No separate preliminary drawing was therefore identified.

A letter written by Barocci on 2 June 1607 introduces an essential qualification to any comparison with the Senigallia altarpiece. Having received the painting back in Urbino, he acknowledged its poor treatment and undertook to retouch it where necessary. Its deterioration had a longer history: he had already offered to intervene

[11] Scientific Analysis of Fine Art 2025.

[12] Scientific Analysis of Fine Art 2025, pp. 2-6.

in 1588, while Bellori subsequently described damage caused by a copyist who applied oiled paper to its surface to trace the composition. Alongside the injuries caused by rodents, this episode explains the need for the intervention. On 20 April 1608 Barocci announced that his restoration of the work was complete; the altarpiece returned to the church on 4 May.[13]

The photographic campaign of 2023 and direct examination in 2024, when the painting was exhibited at ground level in Urbino, have made it possible to distinguish interventions around Saint John's nose, cheeks, and mouth, together with dark reinforcement beneath the chin and along the curls descending towards the shoulder (fig. 4).[14] Much of the hair appears to preserve the earlier handling. Particularly conspicuous is the white stroke at the clavicle, suggesting a shirt beneath the yellow garment: it separates the neck from the drapery and strengthens the head's projection. This accent is identified here with Barocci's restoration of 1607-1608. Its absence from both oils on paper suggests, without proving, that they preserve an earlier state of the motif.

Contour tracings prepared for the present study further clarify the relationship between the three versions (figs. 4-5). Comparison at 1:1 scale reveals differences in proportion, inclination, and the placement of the facial features, while their superimposition, aligned at the tip of the nose, confirms that neither head on paper coincides precisely with the corresponding figure in the altarpiece. Allowing for the inevitable limitations introduced by photographic scale and distortion, these discrepancies argue against straightforward mechanical tracing and suggest instead a freer reformulation of the motif, whether in relation to the painting itself or to preparatory material retained in the studio.

The two oils for the *Head of Saint John* also differ in facture. Both isolate the head against a pale field, replacing the narrative setting of the altarpiece with an independent study of expression and bearing. The garments preserve the connection with Saint John's role in the composition, while the surrounding ground gives the image something of the immediacy of a drawing. In the Washington version, the pink and red accents of the face and the carefully articulated locks remain close to the pictorial language of the altarpiece. The yellow garment and red drapery are more summarily indicated, directing attention towards the face and enhancing its movement. Pillsbury described its construction over a light tan ground, with brown indications of the features, grey shadows, and subsequent additions of flesh and drapery colours. He also recorded repaired tears, abrasion, and reinforcement in the

[13] Freeman Bauer 1986, pp. 355-357; Bohn and Mann 2012, p. 158 and p. 178, nn. 7-10.

[14] In the absence of dedicated diagnostic analysis, these observations are based on visual examination alone and should therefore be treated with appropriate caution.

hair and shadows. Any comparison must therefore take its condition, as well as its original handling, into account.[15]
The present work is more substantial in touch. Fuller strokes construct the hair, while the nose, chin, and shadowed side of the face acquire greater emphasis. Dark accents beneath the forelock strengthen the projection of the forehead, while rapid grey strokes beside the silhouette suggest a cast shadow and give the head a more independent spatial presence. A comparable use of the surrounding ground occurs in the oil study of Mary Magdalen at Bayonne, connected with the same altarpiece, where the light surface remains active in the construction of volume and sets thinly painted passages against more heavily worked areas.

Marciari's recognition of the differences between the two heads remains important, although the conclusion drawn from them may be reconsidered. Repetition does not necessarily establish a hierarchy in which one version represents the invention and the other a diminished reflection of it. Nor can spontaneity alone determine precedence: the same quality led Turner to place the present head before the Washington version, whereas Bohn and Mann reached the opposite conclusion on the basis of its greater control. The disagreement itself shows how difficult it is to infer sequence from handling alone. More significant are the nature and coherence of the differences. The present head does not merely intensify effects already present in the Washington version. Its broader strokes give the hair greater substance, the reinforced shadows lend the face a firmer structure, and the grey accents around the silhouette establish a space of its own. These choices alter the relationship between the head and its setting, producing an image capable of sustaining its expressive force independently of the narrative context for which the motif was devised. The pale field is particularly telling. In the altarpiece, Saint John's head is defined through its relationship with neighbouring figures and draperies; here, those relationships are replaced by a small number of carefully judged tonal contrasts. The painter leaves parts of the support active, using dark accents and variations in the density of the paint to articulate the form. This economy suggests a close command of the invention and is difficult to reconcile with a merely reproductive purpose.

Technical findings cannot, of course, identify an individual hand. Nevertheless, the high quality of execution, together with the way in which the work emphasises characteristics closely associated with Barocci's practice – the tonal harmonies, fluid handling, active use of the paper ground, and the material features revealed by diagnostic examination – makes the intervention of either a particularly accomplished copyist or a later imitator working outside Barocci's immediate context difficult to sustain. On the evidence presently available, Barocci's authorship offers the most convincing explanation. An attribution to an unnamed follower would require an artist

[15] Pillsbury 1978, pp. 171-172 and p. 173, n. 7.

capable not only of reproducing his pictorial vocabulary but of reworking it with comparable assurance, without any more specific alternative having emerged from the debate.

The differences from the Washington version may therefore be better understood in terms of function and chronology. The Washington head retains something of the character of a drawing made with the brush, its abbreviated draperies directing attention towards the study of flesh, light, and expression. The present work gives the same invention greater pictorial weight and autonomy. Its freedom is compatible with a higher degree of finish: the open passages and visible brushwork form part of the effect of the completed object. The possibility raised by Bohn and Mann that it was made for a collector therefore provides a persuasive, albeit hypothetical, explanation of its character.

Recent exhibitions devoted to Barocci, particularly the 2024 exhibition in Urbino, which brought together oil studies on paper from different phases of his career, have further demonstrated the extent to which he employed the technique over more than forty years, adapting its expressive range and producing works of markedly different character. A particularly instructive comparison is offered by two heads in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: the study of Nicodemus for the Senigallia *Entombment* and that of Elizabeth for the *Visitation*. Both are accepted works by Barocci and belong to the same collection, yet they differ radically in execution, treatment of the ground, and in the balance between drawing and painting. In these respects, the Elizabeth is considerably closer to the present head, whereas the Nicodemus finds a more immediate parallel in the Washington study.

Such contrasts suggest that Barocci's handling of the oil painting on paper evolved significantly over the course of his career. They also raise the possibility that the present work belongs to a different, and perhaps later, moment than the original studies made in the early 1580s for the *Entombment*. In the present writer's view, its greater pictorial autonomy and its closer relationship to later examples of Barocci's practice make such a chronology plausible, although not demonstrable on stylistic evidence alone. More specifically, the force and handling of the brushwork appear, in the present writer's view, to recall directly the passages associated with Barocci's later restoration interventions on the *Entombment* itself, now more clearly visible thanks to the recent photographic campaign. This raises the possibility that the head was executed in the immediate context of that restoration, when Barocci had the Senigallia painting physically in his studio for approximately a year. Although necessarily hypothetical, this circumstance would provide a particularly plausible context for both the production of the head and its distinctive stylistic character.[16]

[16] On the restoration, see also Bohn and Mann 2012, p. 167.

Such a return to a successful motif is consistent with Barocci's documented practice. In a deposition of 9 July 1590, given in connection with the disappearance of a drawing for the *Entombment* at Senigallia that he had lent for the purpose of having it engraved, he explained that painters preserved cartoons and drawings both as records of their achievements and as resources for producing related works with less labour, expense, and time. The surviving fragments of many of his cartoons and oil sketches, together with their reuse – including in multiple autograph versions of the same subject – demonstrate the continuing life of such inventions within and beyond his studio. They allowed the artist to return to an image long after its original commission, whether to repeat it closely or to develop it anew.[17]

In this respect, the oil painting on paper offered Barocci an ideal means of extending the life of a successful motif: it allowed him to revisit and refine an image developed for a major commission, while translating it into an object of intimate scale and high pictorial ambition. Such works could also address a private collecting audience rarely served by an artist otherwise devoted chiefly to large altarpieces and public commissions. At the same time, they brought drawing and painting into unusually close contact, preserving the freedom of graphic invention within the substance of colour.

[17] Tschudi-Madsen 1959, pp. 273-277; Verstegen 2003, pp. 378-383; Verstegen 2007, pp. 101-123; Verstegen 2019; Baroni 2022, pp. 305-306, 308, and p. 309, n. 13.

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Fig. 1. Federico Barocci, *The Entombment of Christ*, 1579-1582, oil on canvas, 295 × 187 cm, Senigallia, Church of Santa Croce.



Fig. 2. Federico Barocci, *The Entombment,* c. 1579-1582, black chalk and oil paint on oiled paper, 47.8 × 35.6 cm, Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, inv. 85.GG.26.



Fig. 3. Federico Barocci, *Head of Saint John the Evangelist,* detail, infrared reflectography. From Scientific Analysis of Fine Art, LLC, 2025.



Fig. 4. Comparison of the three versions of the *Head of Saint John the Evangelist* at 1:1 scale. From left to right: Washington, National Gallery of Art, inv. 1979.11.1; detail of the Senigallia altarpiece; the present work. Below: corresponding contour tracings.



Fig. 5. Superimposed contour tracings of the three versions of the Head of Saint John the Evangelist illustrated in fig. 4, aligned at the tip of the nose.

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