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Tommaso Salini Revisited: Two New Attributions

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Potentially one of the most infamous and idiosyncratic figures from the Caravaggesque coterie, Tommaso Salini (c.1575–1625), also known as ‘Mao,’ is foremost remembered for his bond with his biographer Baglione (1566–1643). It is paradoxical, therefore, that scholars have been far from certain about most of the canvases Salini painted, despite the personal anecdotes peppering his long career. In Baglione’s *Lives* of 1642, the author waxes lyrical about Salini composing works “with good taste and diligence,” and he credits Salini with being “the first person to place flowers and leaves in vases, with various whimsical and strange inventions.”¹ Baglione was possibly biased considering the pair’s close friendship, for Caravaggio (1571–1610) described Salini as Baglione’s “guardian angel.”² Numerous works have ambiguously carried Salini’s name over the years, and although he had a long career, only a few autograph paintings definitively attributed to him have been discovered. Recent scholarship has refocused connoisseurship on the artist and these contemporary endeavours are an excellent foundation upon which to build a corpus of well-founded attributions. However, the majority of pictures that have been attributed to Salini seem to contradict each other, as they are so dissimilar that they could not have been executed by one hand. Many of them have a contrived aesthetic and picturesque ambience that should not be dated to the first quarter of the *seicento* in Rome, as they are more sublime and indicative of artists working later in the century.

Studies pertaining to Caravaggio and his followers are intrinsically linked to complex problems of attribution. As such, the traditional approach of the connoisseur is still very much alive in the age of the social and theoretical art historian. This article will attribute two pictures to Salini, who was a personal enemy and artistic follower of Caravaggio. The attribution of *Still Life with Poppies* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) and *Piping Shepherd Boy* (Foundling Museum, London) are significant additions to the artist’s career and suggest that he was a more talented and original artist than is often thought.

Familiarity with Salini’s biography in Baglione’s *Lives* is essential when scrutinising the artist, especially when proposing additions to his canon. Scholars ought to know Salini much better, but art historians have been constrained by the controversially attributed canvases that have carried his name over the years. In light of this, a major reassessment of Salini’s work is imperative. His colourful personality only contributes to this need. As Baglione wrote: “[Salini] was excessively free of speech and largely biting.”³ Salini’s tongue-lashings, directed at his fellow painters, seem to have been born largely out of jealousy, as he was not as spectacular an artist as most of his compatriots, despite being made a Cavaliere dello Sperone d’Oro in 1623.⁴ Salini, who notoriously lambasted Caravaggio in the infamous Baglione libel trial of 1603, ironically became caught in the wave of Caravaggism.⁵ Salini

is an interesting seventeenth-century celebrity who appeals to the modern imagination by way of his reclusive identity and his aversion to Caravaggio. His personal reputation and the ambiguity of his oeuvre are strong reasons for further scholarship.

Salini's posthumous reputation has been hampered by scholarship's excessive expansion of his oeuvre. Several paintings, often with only a gentle air of the artist's style, have been sold at auction as autograph works. There still remains much discord between the definite, or at least highly plausible, Salinis and the remaining works that have been ascribed to him. A stringent approach must be implemented when inspecting Salini's career because it is highly likely that some saleroom works were painted after the artist's lifetime. Auction houses have recently sold Salini-like pictures under the umbrella identity of the "Pseudo-Salini," simply meaning works that mirror those by Salini, despite once crediting canvases of this pedigree to the master himself. Employing the prefix "pseudo" has been beneficial in the sense that it has prevented Salini's oeuvre from growing beyond recognition, but it must be clarified that these works, considering their stylistic divergence, are certainly not all by the same author. Victoria Markova was the first scholar to examine Salini's work with true caution, differentiating between pictures that might be autograph and those from Salini's circle.⁶ A few decades ago, research on Salini plateaued, just as it seemed to gain momentum, but the re-exploration of pictures attributed to him has since been refined.

Still Life with Poppies

The Caravaggesque *Still Life with Poppies* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) [Fig. 1] is an oil painting that was known to some early scholars through a black and white photograph first published by Hanns Swarzenski in 1954.⁷ Previous to this, the picture had appeared on the cover of *Art News* (September 1950) shortly after its restoration.⁸ The work was subsequently printed in Mia Cinotti's estimable monograph on Caravaggio, but she neglected to comment on it.⁹ Michael Kitson did, however, briefly discuss the attribution of the canvas in 1969, before attributing it to an anonymous member of the Caravaggisti.¹⁰ The new colour reproduction presented here reveals the Boston *Poppies* to be a canvas of surprisingly fine technique and good condition, despite being stitched together in a few places.¹¹

The composition is of a dark green "chianti" bottle wrapped in a decaying wickerwork flask, within which are three flowers in bloom (one red and one white poppy, as well as a white peony poppy) and three drooping poppy buds. Several leaves of fresh foliage rhythmically twist from the bottle-cum-vase to create an arabesque-like shape that is rather Baroque in style. A few coils have become detached from the flask, forming an organic composition that spills into the viewer's space by way of foreshortening. Unusually for a Caravaggesque work, there is no directed light flooding from beyond the frame; the bottle sits alone on a dark stone surface positioned like a diamond wedge, similar to the surfaces that Caravaggio placed in this way.¹² A pale brown is so thinly applied to the background that the coarse twill of the canvas is highly visible. It is unusual for any of the Caravaggisti to paint a background as pale as this in colour, although Caravaggio himself depicted his *Basket of Fruit* (c.1596–1601; Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, Milan) against an oatmeal backdrop. There are myriad subtle modulations and

fine brushwork on the leaves, the wickerwork, and the heads of the poppies, which narrows our search for the painter to a prominent still life specialist.

The Boston *Poppies* has been virtually erased from modern scholarship, as it has not been exhibited since 2004.¹³ One of the main reasons for this is likely its problematic attribution to Caravaggio, which has gained little momentum since Swarzenski's publication. Swarzenski attributed the still life to Caravaggio but did not firmly place it in the artist's canon as he found similarities in works from Caravaggio's Roman career as well as his Neapolitan, Maltese and Sicilian sojourns. Conversely, the canvas features a misspelled signature ("Michel Angelo Carivaggi f") that eliminates it from the artist's oeuvre rather than adding to it. *The Beheading of St John the Baptist* (1608; St John's Co-Cathedral, Malta) is the only confirmed



Fig. 1. Attributed by the author to Tommaso Salini, *Still Life with Poppies*, c.1610–20, oil on canvas.
© Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Charles Potter Kling Fund.

work with a literal signature by Caravaggio (“f Michalang”), which was done for stylistic reasons as it forms the blood that flows from the Baptist’s neck. The signature on the Boston *Poppies* is likely to have been a later addition by an owner or a dealer, and who was possibly foreign, given the spelling.¹⁴ The canvas has the same *trompe l’oeil* effects as Caravaggio’s early secular subjects, but the *concetto* and technique are, as connoisseurs now know, entirely atypical of Caravaggio’s brush.

No scholar has published an alternative attribution for the Boston *Poppies*, which is startling because it has many formal characteristics in common with the other works that have been attributed to Salini. The worn wickerwork flask is a reprise of the one in *Young Peasant with a Flask* (c.1615–1620; Thyssen-Bornemisza Gallery, Madrid) [Fig. 2], and another in *The Old Glassman* (c.1615–1620; formerly Badminton House, Gloucestershire) [Fig. 3]. It must also be remembered that Baglione highlighted Salini’s work as a still life painter when he said that he managed to “place flowers and leaves in vases, with various whimsical and strange inventions,” a description that is highly suggestive of this piece.¹⁵ It is important to



Fig. 2. Tommaso Salini, *Young peasant with a flask*, c.1615–1620, oil on canvas.
© Museo-Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.

note that the scarlet shade used for the head of the Boston *Poppies* is identical to the colour selected for the bows in Flesh's hair in Salini's masterpiece: *The Apotheosis of St Nicholas of Tolentino: With the World, Devil and Flesh Under His Feet* (c.1615–16; Chiesa di Sant'Agostino, Rome) [Fig. 4]. The green bush in *St Nicholas of Tolentino* also features the same shades of sage and olive green that are in the foliage of the Boston work.

Swarzenski attributed the Boston *Poppies* to Caravaggio at a time when studies pertaining to the artist were still in their relative infancy. Swarzenski was a contemporary of Roberto Longhi's (1890–1970), and he was probably highly influenced by Longhi's *Mostra del Caravaggio e dei Caravaggeschi*, an early benchmark of Caravaggio scholarship.¹⁶ The picture was unearthed from the Penshurst Place collection in Kent, where it was first recorded in 1698. It remained in the family's hands until 1950, when it was sold to the Museum of Fine Arts as a genuine Caravaggio.¹⁷ Swarzenski viewed *Poppies* as a companion piece to the *Flowers in a Flask* (c.1615–20; Pinacoteca Civica, Forlì) [Fig. 5] because of their visual similarities and similar canvas sizes.¹⁸ Nonetheless, the spectacular Forlì *Flowers* and the Boston *Poppies* are not



Fig. 3. Attributed to Tommaso Salini, *The Old Glassman*, c.1615–20, oil on canvas. Formerly Badminton House, Gloucestershire.

similar enough to comprise a set as they differ in their overall manner and colouring, despite likely having been made by the same hand.¹⁹

Numerous scholars have ascribed the Forlì picture to Salini primarily on the basis of the aforementioned flask motif.²⁰ The comparable battered flasks, however, are distinctly separate objects, as the size and shades of the wicker superbly contrast with one another. The flask in the Forlì painting is the palest of the three examples as its palette ranges from oatmeal to cream. The oils in the Boston and Thyssen pictures are alike in their shades of dark brown, but the Boston flask lacks the golden highlighting of the Thyssen. Yet, all the flasks are comparable because the plaiting runs down the edges to bind the straw in the same way. While the Boston *Poppies* are in a flask without a handle, unlike the others, the wickerwork features exactly the same type of “handwriting,” to quote Giovanni Morelli (1816–1891) in his innovative approach to solving problems of attribution.²¹ Morelli, a medical doctor by training, inspected minute details in works of art in a pathological manner in the hope that they would reveal authorship. The Forlì *Flowers* shows an expansive palette of Mannerist colours that range from



Fig. 4. Tommaso Salini, *St Nicholas of Tolentino: With the World, Devil and Flesh Under his Feet*, c.1615–16, oil on canvas. Chiesa di Sant’Agostino, Rome.

ruby red to violet and yellow. The heads of the lilies are realistically rendered in the same way as the Boston *Poppies*, showing an eye for detail and time-consuming technique. Markova states that the lilies are similar to those in the *St Nicholas*.²² The petals that drop from the red flowers to the right of the Forlì canvas, whilst being a reminder of *vanitas* symbolism, mirror the organic shape of the leaf that is partly seen in the shadow to the right of the Boston *Poppies*.

The compositions of all these canvases are similar in the way that the plaiting of the flasks folds across the straw at the base. However, the *Young Peasant* and the Forlì *Flowers* have a distinctly Caravaggesque loose coil of wickerwork that spirals from the top and overflows into the viewer's space. The use of shadow over part of the flasks is a strong suggestion that they were painted by the same artist's hand. The Thyssen and Forlì flasks are moderately submerged in shadow, as are the furthest leaves in the Boston *Poppies*; the subtle technique enhances the three dimensional effect. Moreover, the foliage round the left of the vase in the Boston *Poppies* mirrors the pattern of the *Young Peasant's* hair that falls into shadow at



Fig. 5. Attributed to Tommaso Salini, *Flowers in a Flask*, c.1610–20, oil on canvas. Pinacoteca Civica, Forlì, © Photo SCALA, Florence.

the right of the canvas. The Boston *Poppies* does not have the same tear in its wickerwork as per the other examples, but the pattern in which the paint is applied to create the wicker is identical, as is the way that the plants, from the buds to the flowers and foliage, are illustrated. The lighting is dissimilar in each painting, probably for atmospheric reasons, yet they all feature *chiaroscuro* to various degrees. Close inspection of these still lifes affirms, with some conviction, that they belong to the body of work that Salini was best remembered for producing within his lifetime.

The Piping Shepherd Boy

The examination of other paintings that have been attributed to Salini suggests that *The Piping Shepherd Boy* (Foundling Museum, London) [Fig. 6] is another work that is possibly of his hand. Salini's name has been tentatively linked with this picture in the past, but the painting has remained on the periphery of Salini scholarship.²³ The attribution of *The Piping Shepherd Boy* to Salini and an assistant was suggested when it was first published by Markova in 1989, but scholars have neglected the picture ever since.²⁴ This is largely due to the serious attention required in establishing Salini's definitive oeuvre before putative works can be suggested.

The Foundling *Shepherd* is a picture of high quality; some of the paintwork is obscured but the canvas does not display obvious damage. Set amid a beautifully lit landscape, the protagonist, 'Caravaggesquely' clad in a one-shouldered cream shirt and sheepskin jerkin,



Fig. 6. Attributed by the author to Tommaso Salini, *The Piping Shepherd Boy*, c.1620–25, oil on canvas. © Coram in the care of the Foundling Museum.

is interrupted during his piping by a white and brown retriever, whose coat is tinged with chestnut brown. Light from the top left illuminates the foreground and the shepherd, who is wearing short brown trousers with a white lining. To the right of the canvas are three sheep harmoniously grouped in varying poses. The shepherd boy rests against a tree trunk, behind which a well is depicted, although it is difficult to perceive in the painting's current state. A large donkey strains its neck from behind the well and turns to look at the shepherd and his attentive dog. The retriever's chest is skilfully created by a continual shape that runs from the dog's neck into the line that separates the boy's flesh from that of the edge of his trousers. This is probably a deliberate invention, although the artist may have incorporated the dog after painting the protagonist, and decided to make an attempt at seamlessly blending the figures, especially because the dog is not obviously visible through the boy's knee.

Rigorous first-hand examination of the Foundling *Shepherd* reveals that it has many characteristics in common with Salini's style and recommends that the work can be attributed to him. Although the Caravaggesque quality is part of the work's appeal, it has some details that designate the attribution to Salini. The shepherd's pose is clearly similar to St Peter's in Caravaggio's destroyed *Christ on the Mount of Olives* (c.1604–05; formerly Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin) [Fig. 7], which I have identified as being influenced, in turn, by Michelangelo's (1475–1564) fresco depicting the *Drunkenness of Noah* (1509; Sistine Chapel, Vatican City, Rome).²⁵ The Foundling protagonist has even more of an affinity with the Michelangelo than the Caravaggio, due to the way in which the boy, like Noah, raises and bends his left leg, and leans forward to arch his back. Even subtle details, such as the angle



Fig. 7. Caravaggio, *Christ on the Mount of Olives*, c.1604–05, oil on canvas. Formerly Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin; destroyed in 1945. Photo © bpk / Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

of the foot and the askew big toe with jagged nail, are comparable with the Michelangelo and Caravaggio prototypes. The donkey is also reminiscent of Caravaggio's *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (c.1597; Doria Pamphilj Gallery, Rome), although it is more prominent in the Caravaggio. The same painting probably inspires the classical landscape, with the sun attempting to break through the clouds. Meanwhile, the trees on the hillside possibly derive from the Carracci brothers, which shows Salini was not only influenced by Roman artists, but Bolognese classicists as well.²⁶

Although the *Piping Shepherd* has not yet been definitively placed in Salini's canon, it is strikingly similar to some works that have been. For example, the pose of the boy echoes that of Flesh in the *St Nicholas* [Fig. 4]. The shepherd and Flesh appear in similar poses in their manner of leaning forward and are shown in profile. The folds of the shepherd's shirtsleeve form the same organic pattern as the heavy folds of Flesh's costume. The pinks in the shepherd's skin, tinged with cream and grey, are also fairly similar to Flesh's complexion. Meanwhile, the *Piping Shepherd* wears a realistic botanical garland that may be linked with some of the still lifes that have been given Salini's name in recent years, and the large oblong leaves are reminiscent of the foliage in front of the Devil in the *St Nicholas*. Another comparable work to the Foundling picture is the *Young Peasant* [Fig. 2]. Similarities include the shared physiognomic features of the protagonists, as well as the depiction of their hair and their mouths half-open in speech. It is also noticeable that the figures face the same direction, despite their torsos being depicted from opposite sides, and that they have a similar band of dark shading around their bare shoulders. In the *Young peasant* this is to show the shadow that they cast on the wall, while in the *Piping Shepherd* it is the lining of the sheepskin jerkin.

There is, however, some conflict between the *Piping Shepherd* and Salini's brush. The sheepskin jerkin is not akin to the one worn by the *Young Peasant*, where the brushwork is softer and more lyrical, contrasting with the heavier, staccato painting of the *Piping Shepherd's* costume that mirrors the fur of his flock. The *Piping Shepherd's* skin is finished with more defined moulding than in most works assigned to Salini, but that does not loosen the attribution to him, as it would presumably be a later work of which there are no documented examples. However, this is based upon assumption that Salini's technique became more sculptural with age, unlike Caravaggio's. The *Piping Shepherd* is a more sophisticated work than anything else currently attributed to Salini and its overall air suggests it was painted late in his career. Nonetheless, some of the light and shade echoes Salini's earlier innovations, especially the shaft of light that emerges between the tree and the well that cuts into the action in the same way as the spotlight in the *Young Peasant*. There is no definite work by Salini to feature a passage of landscape painting, but several pictures that have been designated as "pseudo" do. It may be that Salini incorporated landscapes in his own work and they, in turn, explain their inclusion in the art of his followers. The current discourse about the Caravaggesque circle suggests that the *Piping Shepherd* can be attributed to Salini, and the technique and overall concept suggest that it should be considered a mature work from c.1620–25.

Conclusion

After scrutinising a wide-ranging assortment of paintings attributed to Salini, scholars are now closer to personalising the identity of this elusive Caravaggist and expanding, with conviction, his poorly defined corpus. Too many paintings have been attributed to Salini in recent years, and this has thrown his oeuvre into perpetual confusion. Furthermore, recent scholarship has depicted him as a mediocre artist and, as such, he has been relegated to the fringe of Caravaggism studies. However, Salini left a distinct imprint on the Roman art scene. Although best remembered for being Baglione's sidekick, recent scholarship affirms that Salini produced a varied pictorial catalogue, comprising religious altarpieces, still lifes and genre scenes. Salini is actually a finer painter than he has been given credit for, and his overall style sits somewhere between Baglione's Mannerism and the early Baroque tendencies of the Caravaggisti. Salini's still life paintings, which Baglione mentioned in the artist's biography, have also gained momentum in recent years. Indeed, the broken wicker could qualify as being part of Salini's "various whimsical and strange inventions" that Baglione remembered. If the Boston and Forlì pictures are indeed Salini's, then Baglione's praise for his fine depictions of flowers is well justified. The findings presented here show Salini to be a certainly overlooked and a probably misunderstood painter from the seicento. The Boston and London pictures carry Salini's name once more, and it is hoped that they will be a high tidemark for further works to carry his name in the future.

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- 1 'Con buon gusto, e diligente furono ad oglio da lui dipinti' and 'accomodare i fiori ne' vasi con diverse inventioni molto capricciose' in G. Baglione, *Le vite de' pittori scultori et architetti* (Naples, 1642) 176.
- 2 Caravaggio declared that Salini was Baglione's "angelo custode" in the libel trial of 1603; see W. Friedlaender, *Caravaggio Studies* (New York: Schocken Books, 1955) 277.
- 3 'Di favella soverchiamente libero, e in gran parte mordace.' In Baglione, *Le vite*, 176.
- 4 Baglione recalls Salini being made a Knight of the Golden Spur. Baglione, *Le vite*, 176.
- 5 Mancini listed Manfredi, Ribera, Spadarino, Cecco del Caravaggio, and Saraceni ("in parte") as Caravaggio's main followers. See G. Mancini in A. Marucchi and L. Salerno, eds., *Considerazioni sulla Pittura c.1617–21* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1956) 224.
- 6 V. Markova, 'Alcune nuove proposte per Tommaso Salini,' *Paragone*, no. 475, 1989, 26–41. Also see M. Gregori, 'Altre aggiunte a Tommaso Salini,' *Paragone* no. 475, 1989, 52–57 and G. Papi, 'Un tema Caravaggesco frai quadri di figura di Tommaso Salini,' *Paragone* no. 475, 1989, 42–51.
- 7 Hanns Swarzenski, 'Caravaggio and Still Life Painting: Notes on a Recent Acquisition,' *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts*, no. 288, 1954, 22–38. The painting is currently in store.
- 8 Ibid 25.
- 9 M. Cinotti, *Caravaggio la vita e l'opera* (Bergamo: Edizioni Blois, 1991) 229.
- 10 M. Kitson, *The Complete Paintings of Caravaggio* (Italy: Weidenfeld Press, 1969) 109.
- 11 I am grateful to Claire Whitner, Curatorial Research Associate at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, for providing me with this photograph and for discussing the attribution.
- 12 For example, Caravaggio places the backgammon board at an angle in *The Cardshapers* (c.1596; Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas) and positions the slab as a diamond wedge in *The Entombment of Christ* (1602–03; Vatican Museum, Rome).
- 13 The painting was last displayed in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, from 14 May 2003–4 January 2004, as part of the exhibition *John Currin Selects*.
- 14 Swarzenski, 'Caravaggio and Still Life Painting,' 36.
- 15 Baglione, *Le vite*, 176.
- 16 Roberto Longhi, *Mostra del Caravaggio e dei Caravaggeschi*, ex. cat. (Florence: Sansoni, 1951).
- 17 The work was sold on 13 April 1950 for \$20,160.
- 18 The Boston *Poppies* measures 66 x 57 cm whereas the Forlì *Flowers* measures 68.5 x 51.2 cm.
- 19 Kitson, *The Complete Paintings*, 109.
- 20 For more on the Forlì *Flowers in a flask* see S. Capelli, 'Tommaso Salini' in C. Strinati and A. Zuccari, eds., *I Caravaggeschi: Percorsi e protagonisti* (Milan: Skira, 2011) 639–645; and V. Markova, 'Tommaso Salini, between Baglione and Caravaggio' in R. Vodret, ed., *Caravaggio's Rome: 1600–1630* (Milan: Skira, 2012) 171–181. However, the attribution to Salini was rejected in E. Fumagalli, 'Italian Still Life. Florence,' *The Burlington Magazine*, no. 1208, 2003, 820, on stylistic grounds.
- 21 G. Morelli (Ivan Lermolief), *Italian Painters*, V.1 and V.2, trans. C. J. Foulkes, (London: Murray, 1907).
- 22 Markova, 'Tommaso Salini,' 173.
- 23 A black and white image of *The Piping Shepherd Boy* is printed in *Paragone*, no. 475, 1989, 26–41, illustration no. 39, with an attribution by Markova to "Tommaso Salini e aiuti (?)."

- 24 The work was donated to the Foundling Hospital by the art dealer William Agnew in 1891, and it is in keeping with the Foundling's collection that focuses on images of children. Agnew attributed the work to Pier Francesco Molo, whose authorship is stated on the plaque that is attached to the frame. The picture is not recorded in the Governors' Minutes or the General Committee Minutes of the Foundling Hospital in 1981 as I researched these. See B. Nicolson, *The Treasures of the Foundling Hospital* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972) 71, where it is ascribed to the "seventeenth century, Italian school." Clovis Whitfield attributes the work to Salini; see C. Whitfield, *Whitfield Fine Art at Partridge* (London: Whitfield Fine Art, 2008), exhibition catalogue, 76.
- 25 For an illustration of the Vatican fresco see C. Seymore Jr. ed., *Michelangelo: The Sistine Chapel Ceiling* (New York: Norton, 1995), 17: Figure 18.
- 26 The landscape calls to mind numerous works by Annibale Carracci including *The Penitent Magdalene* (c.1598; Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge), *Domine Quo Vadis?* (1602–03; The National Gallery, London), and *The Flight into Egypt* (c.1603; Doria Pamphilj Gallery, Rome).

