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The Power of Sight:

A Reexamination of Guercino and Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego* Paintings

In Light of Early Modern Vision Theory

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B.A., Case Western Reserve University, 2015

Advisor: Sarah McPhee

An abstract of
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
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Abstract

The Power of Sight:
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In Light of Early Modern Vision Theory

By Abbey Hafer

This paper works to expand the interpretation of Guercino and Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego* paintings provided by Erwin Panofsky in his seminal 1936 essay, focusing on the themes of sight and the production of knowledge through visual observation. When the discussion surrounding these paintings is enlarged to acknowledge the artists' engagement with visual observation and optical theory, the key role of vision in the contemplative process depicted in and stimulated by these works becomes clear. This paper begins with an examination of Guercino's c. 1618 *Et in Arcadia Ego* painting, in which the shepherds are engaged in the act of seeing and contemplating the symbols of death arranged before them. The presence of sight as a means of knowledge production within this painting suggests that the artist developed an interest in sight early in his career. With this interest established, the paper will then shift to focus on works produced during Guercino's years in Rome, considering his Roman experience as it informs his lesser-known *Memento Mori* (c. 1622-23) and other works. Finally, the paper turns to Poussin's paintings of the *Et in Arcadia Ego* theme, concluding with a discussion of the artist's established interest in optics and how elements of contemporary optical theory inform the portrayal of sight in these works. The author situates these artists and their pictures within the transformative climate of scientific investigation that they were exposed to in Rome in the first decades of the seventeenth century. In the *memento mori* paintings discussed here, a crucial relationship between death, sight, and knowledge is forged. To begin to understand death we must look. Close visual attention and ruminating on the part of the beholder are rewarded with knowledge, with a deeper understanding of the concept of death/mortality as it relates to the body and soul of the beholder.

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In his seminal 1936 essay "*Et in Arcadia Ego*: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition," Erwin Panofsky employs several artworks to construct a narrative explaining the meaning of the famous Latin phrase.[1] He relies principally on two seventeenth-century representations of the *Et in Arcadia* theme, the first Guercino's c. 1618 painting of the subject, and the second Poussin's c. 1638-1640 version now in the Louvre [Figs. 1, 2].[2] Panofsky arranges the two pictures as opposing points in his essay, the Guercino serving as a "medieval," moralizing work, and Poussin's painting representing the ultimate classical manifestation of the theme in which the artist has expertly shifted the meaning of the phrase to suggest a more elegiac sentiment.[3]

In his interpretation, Panofsky mapped the qualities of sudden movement and petrifying sight onto the Guercino painting, and static, serene contemplation onto the Poussin.[4] Though

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[1] Erwin Panofsky, "*Et in Arcadia Ego*: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition" in *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History.* 1st ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), 295-320.

[2] Panofsky also includes Poussin's first *Et in Arcadia Ego* painting, dating c. 1628, in his argument [Fig. 16].

[3] Panofsky interprets Guercino's painting as "a medieval *memento mori* in humanistic disguise..." Panofsky, "*Et in Arcadia Ego*," 309-310. His insistence on the simple, "medieval" nature of Guercino's version of the scene serves to heighten the developments of the later painting. For Panofsky, the classicizing Poussin is the end piece of a narrative progression, evidence of a shift from "thinly veiled moralism to undisguised elegiac sentiment." Panofsky, "*Et in Arcadia Ego*," 313.

[4] Panofsky introduces the Guercino picture as follows: "In this painting two Arcadian shepherds are checked in their wanderings by the sudden sight…of a huge human skull that lies on a moldering piece of masonry and receives the attentions of a fly and a mouse, popular symbols of decay and all-devouring time. Incised on the masonry are the words *Et in Arcadia Ego*, and it is unquestionably by the skull that they are supposed to be pronounced…" Panofsky, "*Et in Arcadia Ego*," 307.
In his description of Poussin's work, Panofsky distances it from Guercino's earlier painting of the *Et in Arcadia* scene: "The element of drama and surprise has disappeared. Instead of two or three Arcadians approaching from the left in a group, we have four, symmetrically arranged on either side of a sepulchral monument. Instead of being checked in their progress by an unexpected and terrifying phenomenon, they are absorbed in calm discussion and pensive contemplation. One of the shepherds kneels on the ground as though rereading the inscription for himself. The second seems to discuss it with a lovely girl who thinks about it in a quiet, thoughtful attitude. The third seems trajected into a sympathetic, brooding melancholy. The

these qualities are visually rooted in the works, they give a drastically abbreviated version of the dynamic scenes represented within them. There may in fact be much more to uncover with regard to the themes of sight and the production of knowledge through visual observation present both within the paintings and involving the beholder, than Panofsky's interpretation allows. When the discussion surrounding these paintings is enlarged to acknowledge the artists' engagement with visual observation and optical theory, the key role of vision in the contemplative process depicted in and stimulated by these works becomes clear.

This paper will begin with an examination of an early work painted by Guercino before his move to Rome, his c. 1618 *Et in Arcadia Ego*, in which the shepherds are engaged in the act of seeing and contemplating the symbols of death arranged before them. The presence of sight as a means of knowledge production within this painting suggests that the artist developed an interest in sight early in his career. With this interest established, the paper will then shift to focus on works produced during Guercino's years in Rome, considering his Roman experience as it informs his lesser-known *Memento Mori* (c. 1622-23) and other works. Finally, I will turn to Poussin's paintings of the *Et in Arcadia Ego* theme, concluding with a discussion of the artist's established interest in optics and how elements of contemporary optical theory inform the portrayal of sight in these works. In building my argument, I will work to situate these artists and their pictures within the transformative climate of scientific investigation that they were exposed to in Rome in the first decades of the seventeenth century.

Apart from the work of Louis Marin and Lawrence Steefel Jr., the sense of sight has not emerged as a focus in the scholarship on these paintings, even in the abundant writings on

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form of the tomb is simplified into a plain rectangular block, no longer foreshortened but placed parallel to the picture plane, and the death's-head is eliminated altogether." Panofsky, "*Et in Arcadia Ego*," 312-313.

Poussin's works on the *Et in Arcadia* theme.[5] Because of the increasing importance of sight in scientific efforts of the period, the subject must be taken on. Further, as sight was privileged over other senses in early modern Europe, and was at the center of early modern discourses of knowledge, it is important to examine the paintings through this lens. Theories of sight in the seventeenth century were largely a continuation of visual theory from Medieval and Renaissance Europe that had its roots in Greek thought and early religious teachings.[6] In this period, as Stuart Clark writes, "the eyes were associated with the internal image-making processes that were deemed crucial for all thought."[7] Seventeenth-century artists and educated beholders alike would likely have been familiar with the basic elements of optical theory and therefore with the close relationship between the sense of sight and the processes of knowledge production.

Sight is given a prominent position within Guercino's *Et in Arcadia* painting, and in fact one could argue that the picture is all about looking and the processing of visual knowledge [Fig. 1]. The two shepherds take up the left half of the canvas, and death inhabits the right. Connecting the two halves of the painting are invisible lines of sight from the shepherds' eyes to the skull in the lower right corner. Though these sight lines are not visually perceptible, they cross and re-cross the center of the canvas, suggesting their importance to the depicted scene.

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[5] I refer to the following essays, both of which I will rely on in my discussion of Poussin's works later in this paper: Louis Marin, "Toward A Theory of Reading in the Visual Arts: Poussin's *The Arcadian Shepherds*," in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, ed. Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 293-324, and Lawrence D. Steefel Jr., "A Neglected Shadow in Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego*," *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (Mar 1975): 99-101.

[6] Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 9.
Henning Laugerud, "The Optics of Understanding: Sight, Sensing and Discourses of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe," in *Images of Knowledge: The Epistemic Lives of Pictures and Visualizations*, ed. Nora S. Vaage et. al. (New York: Peter Lang, 2016), 43.

[7] Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, 10.

According to contemporary visual theory, an image of the skull would quite literally traverse the space between it and the shepherds before imprinting on their eyes and allowing the young men to comprehend the object before them. Light was part of this process, and works in a similar way within Guercino's painting. The light source seems to originate to the right of the canvas, in the space of the beholder. Light hits the surface of the skull, casting a shadow just beyond the illuminated bone and the nibbling mouse, before travelling through the center space of the canvas to reach the two shepherds.

Early modern optical theory considered rays of light to be material entities, navigating a physical environment and finally implanting the observed object in a viewer's eyes.[8] When they are understood in such terms, the rays traversing the center of Guercino's picture are not abstractions or symbols of knowledge, but instead real, physical elements. As will be argued below, this material conception of sight may relate to the materiality of the painting itself, particularly to the corporeal nature of the skull and the creatures that accompany it.

The idea that knowledge could be gained through visual observation could explain the sort of suspended state of contemplation that the two shepherds appear to be engaged in. Both men are leaning forward toward the stone pedestal before them and the object of death that rests on its mossy surface. The shepherd on the left, clothed in a light colored, tattered shirt, leans slightly to his right, resting his weight on the wooden staff grasped in both hands. His head tilts toward his right shoulder in a gesture of contemplation, as if to get a better angle on the skull before him. The other shepherd, dressed in a rust colored shirt and hat, leans on his staff as well, his neck reaching forward to aid in the task of intense observation. The posture of the two

[8] Mary Quinlan-McGrath, *Influences: Art, Optics, and Astrology in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 67.

figures suggests deep absorption in the act of looking and understanding. The figures do not appear tense, as though they have just happened upon a terrifying sight, but calm. The main action occurring in the scene is the visual transaction between the shepherds and the skull, and the knowledge that the object imparts on the lookers in the process.

The *memento mori* theme of Guercino's painting fits well into a discussion of optical theory in the period in which he was working, and only strengthens an interpretation of the painting that highlights the processes of sight and knowledge production. The sense of sight was intimately related to religious devotion, and as Clark states, "revealing connections were often made…between the eyes and the divinity, between corporeal vision and spiritual enlightenment, and between seeing the visible world and understanding it as the work of an invisible and omnipotent God."[9] Vision was not only crucial to gaining a scientific knowledge of one's physical surroundings, but also to forming a deeper understanding of the spiritual world. Clark goes on to write that "spiritual 'seeing' could be modeled metaphorically on physical seeing: the 'gaze of the mind' on the gaze of the body. The eyes were assumed to be closest to the soul…(and in one specific cliché, were the 'windows' of the soul)."[10] The reminder of human mortality provided by the skull permeates the souls of the shepherds through their act of looking. The dark shadowed forms of the shepherd's eyes heighten their impression as windows to the soul.

The potential dangers associated with sight make the subject especially appropriate for the *memento mori* theme. Though sight had long been given a privileged status among the senses, it also had the potential to be the most morally dangerous.[11] Visual observations could be

[9] Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, 11.
[10] Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, 11.
[11] Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, 24.

misleading and therefore necessitated critical attention before they could be taken as evidence of reality. In his scientific and philosophical writings, Galileo affirmed the power of observation in the process of knowledge production, but also cautioned that one could be misled by uncritical acceptance of information obtained by the senses.[12] Members of the church also cautioned that as windows to the soul, the senses, and eyesight in particular, could serve as conduits for temptation and vice.[13] By depicting the moment in which spiritual and physical knowledge is produced through sight, Guercino has presented a witty extension of the *memento mori* theme to the beholder. Not only does the picture fulfill its more commonplace function as a reminder of death and warning of the vices of life, but actually goes a step further. This work warns too of a possible mode through which the viewer may endanger his or her soul.

Importantly, certain aspects of the scene seem to have been specifically arranged for the beholder's contemplation. The eye sockets of the skull, the symbolic windows into the soul of death, lock eyes with the viewer, creating an even more powerful line of sight than the shepherds can achieve from their position. The reading of the phrase "*Et in Arcadia Ego,"* or "even in Arcadia, I [Death] am there," inscribed into the block of masonry below the skull further enforces the reminder of death for the beholder, while remaining invisible to the subjects within the painting. The viewer outside of the work therefore undergoes a similar but distinct experience from the shepherds within it.

The beholder also holds a privileged view of the fly, a sight unattainable for the shepherds from their position within the painting. The fly in the lower right corner of the composition highlights the artifice of the painted scene. The viewer is left to question whether

[12] Marco Piccolino and Nicholas J. Wade, "Galileo's Eye: A New Vision of the Senses in the Work of Galileo Galilei," *Perception* 37 (2008): 1314.
[13] Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, 24.

the fly is on the skull, and therefore just another symbol of decay, or if it is in fact on the surface of the painting, present to suggest the virtuosity of the painter.[14] The questionable status of the fly also calls attention to the beholder's reliance on visual observation to form an understanding of what occurs within the picture, and by extension suggests that observation may play a crucial role in gaining a greater understanding of human mortality. The outside viewer alone must discern what layer of the picture the fly rests on, questioning in the process the truth of visual observation.

But there are still further levels of understanding available to the audience as they interact with the work. The skull and accompanying creatures in the foreground form a visual entry point for the beholder [Fig. 3]. The decaying death-head and its crumbling, mossy pedestal seem practically within the viewer's reach, and the dark hollows of its eye sockets implore the beholder to enter the composition. This effect is made more powerful by the shadowed eyes of the shepherds. Their dark, hooded eyes deny the beholder the possibility of a direct connection with the two men, forcing the viewer back to the empty and soulless gaze of the skull.

As the entry point into the painting, the scene of death in the lower right corner is made to strike the viewer with its physical nature. As the last remnants of the skull's flesh are removed by the mouse and fly, a corporeal understanding of death confronts the beholder. The juxtaposition of the human skull and the live animals that feed on it highlights in the most basic way the difference between the vitality of the creatures and the utter death of the head, and brings death as close to the viewer as possible. As material rays bring the gritty scene of death to

[14] The fly on the painting's surface was already an established conceit when Guercino employed it in his c. 1618 painting. See Norman E. Land, "Vasari's *Vita* of Giotto," in *Ashgate Research Companion to Giorgio Vasari*, ed. David J. Cast (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2014), 87 for a discussion of Vasari's account of Cimabue attempting to swat away a fly painted by Giotto, and of Pliny's tale of the painting competition between Parrhasius and Zeuxis.

the beholder's eyes, she can begin to relate it to her own physical body. This physical understanding of death is essential in the process of transforming visual cues into spiritual understanding. The beholder gains not just theoretical understanding through the sight of the skull, but also a physical, corporeal understanding of death and decay.

A parallel experience to that of the shepherds potentially occurs for the beholder outside of the painting. As the beholder studies Guercino's representation of invisible rays transmitting the knowledge of death to the shepherds, physical rays of light carry the painted scene to the viewer's eyes. The physical manifestation of a process that can only be *represented* through the medium of paint can be enacted by the viewer before the work. This clever *concetto* allows the viewer to make real the necessarily artificial processes of sight and knowledge production found in the work.

Guercino likely painted his *Et in Arcadia* scene in his native Cento in the year 1618 after returning from a trip he made to Venice earlier in the same year. During this visit the young artist was exposed to works by Titian and Giorgione, and their influence is evidenced in the rich but somber palette employed by Guercino in the following years.[15] Though nothing is known of the *Et in Arcadia* painting's commission or ownership before it appears in a Barberini inventory of 1644, we do know that Guercino was already producing pictures for prominent patrons in Cento and elsewhere in Italy. [16] Documents suggest that beginning in 1617 Guercino was working on several paintings for Cardinal Alessandro Ludovisi, Archbishop of Bologna and soon-to-be pope.[17]

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[15] Nicholas Turner, *The Paintings of Guercino: A Revised and Expanded Catalogue raisonné* (Rome: Ugo Bozzi Editore, 2017), 7.
[16] Turner, *The Paintings of Guercino*, 318, no. 59.
[17] Nicholas Turner and Carol Plazzotta, *Drawings by Guercino from British Collections* (British Museum Press, 1991), 12.

It was the election of Cardinal Ludovisi as Pope Gregory XV in 1621 that brought Guercino to Rome. The artist set off for the Eternal City in May, summoned to decorate the Loggia delle Benedizioni in St. Peter's. Though this project was never begun, Guercino did produce a number of public and private works in the city, many of which were commissioned by the Ludovisi and their circle.[18] Gregory XV's pontificate and the artist's tenure in Rome were quite brief—after the Pope's death in July 1623, Guercino returned to Cento where he remained until his final move to Bologna in 1642.

During these years, Rome was a locus of scientific investigation. As telescopes and microscopes are being developed and refined, an unprecedented level of visual observation could take place. For the first time, the vastness of the cosmos and the minutia of natural specimens could be probed and known. It is in the first several decades of the seventeenth century that Galileo Galilei was working and publishing in Rome, that the Accademia dei Lincei was attempting to understand and classify the natural world, that Christoph Scheiner was making strides in optical theory, and that Cassiano dal Pozzo was compiling his famous paper museum. Guercino came to Rome during these decades of discovery and formed connections with individuals active within the world of scientific inquiry.

Guercino's first major commission in Rome came from the pope's nephew and right-hand man Cardinal Ludovico Ludovisi. Immediately upon acquiring a casino from Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte on June 3, 1621, Cardinal Ludovisi charged Guercino and *quadratura* specialist Agostino Tassi with its decoration. The pair produced ceiling frescoes for both of the large vaulted rooms in the Casino, the well-known *Triumph of Aurora* on the lower level, and *Allegory of Fame* directly above it. As elucidated by Caroyln Wood in her 1986

[18] Turner, *The Paintings of Guercino*, 9.

article on the frescoes, the program places the Ludovisi at the dawn of a new golden age in which the Church triumphs over heresy.[19]

On the ground floor vault, framed by a fictive cornice that rises above the villa's gardens, Aurora (Dawn) rides across a brightly lit sky in a horse-drawn chariot held aloft by clouds. The allegorical figure references both the natural cycles of light and time, and the symbolic dawn brought about by the Ludovisi family. She processes across the ceiling from the pristine and ordered Day that triumphantly inhabits the lunette at the far left of the composition, toward the disheveled hovel occupied by the slumped figure of Night in the lunette at right [Fig. 4]. Surrounded by crumbling brick walls, and joined by an owl and two sleeping putti, Night sits with her elbow resting on an open book that drapes over her knee. Her hand supports her drooping head, and her eyes are closed, likely in sleep. As Wood points out, "Guercino's representation of Night combines [Cesare] Ripa's description of the 'Quarta parte della Notte' (just before dawn) with the personification of 'Melancholia' to create a vivid image of the ignorance and spiritual destitution implicit in the concepts of darkness and night."[20] Ripa establishes the owl as a bird of the night in several entries in his *Iconologia*, including the "Hora Nona," the ninth hour of the night, where the creature accompanies a young woman dressed in purple robes.[21] An owl is also present in Guercino's earlier *Et in Arcadia Ego* painting (produced about three years before his *Aurora*). In this instance the owl is shown perched in the

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[19] Carolyn H. Wood, "Visual Panegyric in Guercino's Casino Ludovisi Frescoes," *Storia Dell'arte* 58 (1986): 227.

[20] Wood, "Visual Panegyric," 224.

[21] Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia. Padua 1611*, The Renaissance and the Gods (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1976), "Hora Nona" 229. Also mentioned in "Carro della Notte (Night Chariot), which can be pulled by two owls, p. 67.
Ripa's *Iconologia* was first published in Rome in 1593; the first Roman edition illustrated with woodcuts appeared in 1603. Many editions followed, and the book proved very influential to artists and writers.

upper right corner of the picture, looming over the dimly lit contemplation of death that occurs below.[22] Another species of owl features prominently in another *memento mori* painting by Guercino, this one likely produced during the artist's time in Rome. This unique picture holds particular interest in the context of optics in Rome at this time, and will be discussed further below.

Relatively little has been firmly established with regard to Guercino's experiences in Rome during his two-year stay in the city. The argument that he came under the sway of Giovanni Battista Agucchi, secretary of state, artistic advisor to the Ludovisi pope, and strong advocate of classicism, was set forth by Denis Mahon in his 1947 *Studies in Seicento Art and Theory* and has been debated ever since.[23] In addition to the influence of Agucchi, Guercino, through his position of favor with the papal family, would have had access to other individuals and ideas circulating in the Ludovisi circle. According to David Freedberg, Gregory XV brought two members of the Accademia dei Lincei onto his personal staff upon his election in 1621. Both of these men, Giovanni Ciampoli and Virginio Cesarini, were in the midst of reviewing Galileo's *Il Saggiatore* (*The Assayer*) and preparing the manuscript for its impending publication in October 1623.[24] Guercino's patron Cardinal Ludovisi cultivated strong Jesuit connections and an immense interest in learning.[25] Situated within this circle in Rome, the artist would have come into contact with individuals involved in the world of scientific inquiry.

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[22] There has been some debate concerning the species of bird. Turner thinks it is a goldfinch: Turner, *The Paintings of Guercino*, 151.

[23] Denis Mahon, *Studies in Seicento Art and Theory* (Westport, Greenwood Press, 1971). (Originally published London: The Warburg Institute, 1947.)

[24] David Freedberg, *The Eye of the Lynx: Galileo, His Friends, and the Beginnings of Modern Natural History* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 58, 143.
In its final form, Galileo's *Il Saggiatore* was in fact a letter addressed to Cesarini himself.

[25] Torgil Magnuson, *Rome in the Age of Bernini: From the Election of Sixtus V to the Death of Urban VIII*, Vol. I (Stockholm: Almquist & Wiksell International, 1982), 193, 199.

Beyond these individuals, Guercino had access to works of art that were informed by ideas emerging from scientific observation. He was certainly exposed to a strange and captivating painting on the ceiling of a neighboring room in the Casino Ludovisi that dealt with the themes of alchemy and the cosmos [Fig. 5]. Painted by Caravaggio in c. 1597 for the former owner of the Casino and its *vigna*, Cardinal Del Monte, the oil painting reflects the patron's interest in alchemy. The drastically foreshortened figures of *Jupiter, Neptune, and Pluto*, accompanied by their respective beasts, the eagle, hippocamp, and three-headed dog Cerberus, make up an allegory of alchemical theory. Neptune and Pluto engage in a heated discussion while Jupiter manipulates the celestial sphere containing the earth, the sun, and the stars that dominates the composition. Visitors view the lofty scene from below, a dramatic instance of *di sotto in sù* perspective. Guercino employed the same perspectival mode in his *Aurora* fresco, likely looking to Caravaggio's painting for inspiration.[26] But he may have also noted the subject of the painting as one of interest. Similar celestial globes appear in several drawings that Guercino produced later in his career, and in his 1646 paintings of *Atlas*.

While these earlier paintings indicate interest in subjects related to vision and observation, a little known but intriguing painting by Guercino, now in a private collection, relies overtly on the language of optics to convey a *memento mori* message. Nicholas Turner included the painting in his recent catalogue raisonné, suggesting that it dates from Guercino's time in Rome, c. 1622-23.[27] The circumstances surrounding the creation of this small 51 x 68 cm (20 x 26.8 in) work are currently unknown. A barn owl, a common symbol of night and sleep already established in Guercino's oeuvre, dominates the left half of the painting. The carefully rendered

[26] Carolyn H. Wood, "The Indian Summer of Bolognese Painting: Gregory XV (1621-23) and Ludovisi Art Patronage in Rome," (PhD diss., The University of North Carolina, 1988), 45.
[27] Turner, *The Paintings of Guercino*, 146-147, 384, no. 119.

bird looks out to the viewer from his perch—a large book that abuts the picture frame. On the edge of this tome, almost obscured by shadow, Hebrew script forms the word מקרא, or *Mikra*. Directly translated as "that which is read," *Mikra* also refers to the Hebrew Bible.

Above the owl, in the upper left corner of the picture, a painted Latin inscription appears. It reads "NEC HORRET NEC TIMET/ P." and serves as another reference to an Old Testament text. Translated as "he neither trembles nor fears," the phrase refers to Deuteronomy 31:6.[28] In the passage, Moses speaks to the Israelites, assuring them of the constant presence of God: "Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the Lord your God who goes with you. He will not leave or forsake you." The same message is echoed at the end of the next verse with the line "Do not fear or be dismayed."[29] The placement of the inscription in the upper left of this painting echoes the one found in the lower right corner of Guercino's *Et in Arcadia Ego* from several years earlier. Both Latin phrases serve a similar purpose in their respective scenes as a reminder of the inevitability of death. This *Memento Mori* conveys that you should not regard death with fear, a standard Catholic message of the time.[30]

Beside the owl, in the right half of the composition, a putto emerges from the dark ground. His lips form a slight smile, while his gaze, like that of the owl, pierces through the picture plane and engages the beholder. Though his expression is static and outwardly focused, his hands are busy within the composition. With his left hand he polishes the top of a yellowed skull with a green colored cloth, creating, according to Turner, a surface capable of reflecting light.[31] In his right hand the putto holds up a convex mirror or lens to the beholder. Within the

[28] Walter Melion provided this translation and the link to Deuteronomy, April, 2018.
[29] Deut. 31:6-8 English Standard Version.
[30] Turner, *The Paintings of Guercino,* 146-147.
[31] Turner, *The Paintings of Guercino,* 147.

metal-rimmed lens Guercino has depicted what appears to be a pyramid form, the apex of which is obscured by a bright spot of reflecting light. Two rays of shining light emanate from this point. The upper ray travels in the direction of the inscription in the upper left corner, illuminating the painted phrase as the sharp trajectory of light dissolves into the dark background. The other, shorter ray of light points more vaguely in the direction of the owl or book.

According to Turner, the putto in the newly discovered Guercino holds up the mirror "to deflect light away from death's dark corner."[32] The mirror might very well be deflecting light away from the dark corner of the composition where the death-skull sits—a position and angle analogous to the *Et in Arcadia* skull—but in order to be reflected, the light in the mirror must originate in the realm of the beholder. After traveling from the viewer's space into the pictured scene, visible rays of light are reflected from the surface of the mirror back out in the direction of the beholder. This dynamic pathway gives the painting a more developed sense of depth. As the upper ray of light illuminates the phrase incised into the background of the painting, it also reflects back toward the viewer, to the space from which it came.

It is the lens that the putto presents to the beholder that makes this painting so striking. Several examples of similar lenses reflecting distinct rays of light are present in other mid-seventeenth-century images. The frontispiece of Athanasius Kircher's *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae,* for example, an optical encyclopedia published by the Jesuit polymath in Rome in 1646, contains two clearly convex lenses that reflect light in this way, with one distinct ray of light going into the lens and another emerging at an acute angle [Fig. 6]. This emblematic frontispiece was produced after Guercino's *Memento Mori*, and therefore cannot be considered a

[32] Turner, *The Paintings of Guercino,* 146-147.

precedent. But such images demonstrate that lenses like the one painted by Guercino were not only present in Rome in this period, but were depicted in this fashion within the world of Jesuit science and optical theory.

Kircher had a particular interest in optical machinery, and in the effects that these objects created. In fact, he was far more interested in solar clocks and optical machines than in the contemporary scientific debate on the nature of light and the investigation of nature that occupied men like Galileo.[33] Several of these instruments, including the microscope and telescope, had been invented in the early part of the seventeenth century, and were continually refined in the decades that followed. In the early 1640s, the same years that Kircher was working on his *Ars Magna,* the famous telescope manufacturer Eustachio Divini arrived in Rome and set up his optics shop near the Piazza Navona.[34] Jesuits like Kircher and members of the Accademia dei Lincei alike were involved in the optical experiments that accompanied the production of lenses in the city.

In his writing on Baroque optical instruments, George Hersey states that the telescope, microscope, and other mechanisms developed in the early seventeenth century were "virtuoso light-manipulators. They gathered it, filtered it, reflected it, condensed it, refracted it. And, more importantly, all three instruments projected images. With the microscope and the telescope, light gained new significance as the revealer of previously unsuspected worlds…"[35] The lens depicted by Guercino in his *Memento Mori* does many of these things. It has gathered

[33] Roberto Buonanno, *The Stars of Galileo Galilei and the Universal Knowledge of Athanasius Kircher*, Astrophysics and Space Science Library 399 (Springer International Publishing, 2014), 61, 66.
[34] Buonanno, *The Stars of Galileo Galilei*, 49, 51.
[35] George L. Hersey, *Architecture and Geometry in the Age of the Baroque* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 60.

light from the realm of the beholder, reflected it back out within the pictorial space, illuminating the Latin inscription in the process. But with it Guercino also plays with the idea of producing an image, both within the lens itself in the form of a grisaille pyramid, and in the larger context of producing the painting that contains it.

Guercino's pyramid may refer to the shape's role in the conception of vision and formulation of perspective for Renaissance artists. Alberti used the pyramid to describe the geometrical aspects of vision in his writings on perspective, and Leonardo da Vinci referenced the visual pyramid in manuscripts dating to the early 1490s.[36] Leonardo defines perspective as "a rational demonstration by which experience confirms that all things send their images [*similitudine*] to the eye by pyramidal lines…which depart from the surface edges of bodies and coming from a distance draw together in a single point."[37] With this formulation of vision in mind, the pyramid floating within the putto's lens in Guercino's painting can be read as the culminating point for rays of light in the eye.

Other works by Guercino also suggest that he was aware of the lenses being manufactured and disseminated in Rome during his stay and that the artist, or potentially his patron, considered optical themes worthy of artistic depiction. A number of drawings by Guercino further reflect the painter's interest in objects of vision, including the contemporary drawing of Archimedes deflecting the rays of the sun with two mirrors [Fig. 7]. This c. 1621-23 work, now in the British Museum, contains smooth oval lenses rimmed in metal very similar to the object in his *Memento Mori*.[38] Several other drawings, some preparatory and others

[36] Martin Kemp, "Leonardo and the Visual Pyramid," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 40 (1977): 129, 130.
[37] Kemp, "Leonardo and the Visual Pyramid," 129.
[38] See Turner, *The Paintings of Guercino,* 384, fig. 119a.

seemingly independent creations, represent cosmographers immersed in their study of celestial spheres. In the 1630s Guercino produced a particularly striking pen and ink drawing with grey and brown wash of a bearded man with a celestial globe [Fig. 8]. Unconnected to any of the artist's paintings, the drawing was likely done for the artist's own amusement.[39] Later in his career, Guercino created another related image for himself, this time a painting of a bust-length *Cosmographer* holding a compass to the sphere in the lower right corner [Fig. 9]. This c. 1660 work remained in Guercino's studio at the time of his death, and was produced just after completing a commissioned work of a similar subject.[40] The images of cosmographers and astrologers that Guercino produced for his personal enjoyment demonstrate a strong interest in these themes.[41]

There is more direct evidence for a systematic and thorough engagement with optical theory on the part of Nicholas Poussin, the other celebrated Baroque painter to produce works on the *Et in Arcadia* theme. These paintings, along with other works by Poussin, demonstrate the artist's interest in light and shadow, and evidence his intense study of the early seventeenth-century writings of Matteo Zaccolini (1576-1630). Zaccolini, a Theatine painter and author working in Naples and Rome, is best known for his four illustrated volumes on optics and the

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[39] Denis Mahon and Nicholas Turner, *The Drawings of Guercino in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen at Windsor Castle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 88-89, no. 36.

[40] Turner, *The Paintings of Guercino,* 758, fig. 484.I. This painting, created for Sicilian nobleman Don Antonio Ruffo of Messina in 1660, does not survive. Turner's fig. 484.I is a preparatory drawing for the painting. It shows a three-quarter length bearded figure turned toward the right. He looks out to the viewer while manipulating a sphere and compass in his hands.

[41] Guercino also produced a painting of *Astrology*, c. 1650-55, and explicitly includes a telescope in his painting of *Endymion* from 1644 or 1647. Turner, *The Paintings of Guercino,* 690, 633 respectively.

principles of light and shade.[42] Poussin began his study of these manuscripts in Rome in the mid-1620s, and had portions of the treatise copied by his brother-in-law Jean Dughet in order to bring them to Paris in 1640.[43] A drawing by Poussin, now in the Uffizi, closely relates to the diagrammatic illustrations found in the Zaccolini volume.[44] In this drawing, several students draw diligently from configured sets of geometric solids in a studio space. The young artists study the effects of various light sources on objects and the shadows that are cast in those situations in the mode that Zaccolini presents in his illustrations. Poussin shared Zaccolini's belief that artists should perform investigations of chiaroscuro and optics, and then incorporate that knowledge into their art.

Galileo also considered chiaroscuro a crucial tool of observation. Just as painters like Poussin used chiaroscuro and shadow to create the illusion of depth on a flat surface, distant celestial objects were only discernable in space due to the play of light and shadow. As Galileo's descriptions and watercolor illustrations of the moon seen through his telescope demonstrate, he believed the orb's craters to be visible because of the shadows formed by rays of light hitting mountains on its surface [Fig. 10].[45] For Galileo this related directly to his thoughts on the illusionistic representation of three-dimensional forms in art. In a famous letter written to his close friend, the painter Lodovico Cigoli, Galileo entered the long-debated *paragone* between

[42] Zaccolini wrote the four volumes, titled *De colori*, *Prospettiva del colore*, *Prospettiva lineale*, and *Della descrittione dell'ombre prodotte da corpi opachi rettilinei* between 1618-1622.
[43] Elizabeth Cropper and Charles Dempsey, *Nicolas Poussin: Friendship and the Love of Painting* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 155. And Janis C. Bell, "Cassiano Dal Pozzo's Copy of the Zaccolini Manuscripts," in *Leonardo's Writings and Theory of Art*, ed. Claire Farago, 291–313 (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999), 123.
[44] Cropper and Dempsey, *Nicolas Poussin*, 157. Blunt dates it to the 1640s: Cropper and Dempsey, *Nicolas Poussin*, 168.
[45] Piccolino and Wade, "Galileo's Eye," 1329.

sculpture and painting.[46] In the letter, he claimed that painting was the superior art form due to its sophisticated deployment of light and shade in order to create a convincing illusion of depth on a surface that possesses no true relief. A statue on the other hand, Galileo argued, "does have relief not because it is wide, long and deep, but because it is light in some parts and dark in others...We know therefore the depth, not as an object of vision by itself and absolutely, but by accident and with relation to the clean and obscure."[47] The dynamic light and shadow that exists naturally in three-dimensional sculpture must be expertly rendered in the medium of paint, or as Panofsky writes, the painter must employ optical effects in order to deceive the sense of vision.[48]

In the same years that Poussin produced his second *Et in Arcadia Ego* (c. 1638-1640), the artist was at work painting his first set of *Seven Sacraments* for Cassiano dal Pozzo, member of the Academia dei Lincei and one of his most important patrons.[49] Several works in the series, painted between 1636 and 1642, apply the elements of optical theory that Poussin gleaned from Zaccolini's text and illustrations. The most extreme application of the effects of shadow emerges in the *Sacrament of the Eucharist,* which forcefully demonstrates both the artist's understanding of light and shadow, and his fascination with the science of optics. As Cropper and Dempsey state:

> The *Eucharist* for Cassiano dal Pozzo, which presented Poussin with the opportunity to construct an interior, artificially illuminated space that resembled the controlled circumstances of studio experiment, provides the most deliberate

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[46] See Erwin Panofsky, "Galileo as Critic of the Arts: Aesthetic Attitude and Scientific Thought," *Isis* 47, no. 1 (March 1956): 3-5.
[47] Piccolino and Wade, "Galileo's Eye," 1331.
[48] Panofsky, "Galileo as Critic of the Arts," 4.
[49] Poussin had access to Cassiano's Paper Museum (*Museo Cartaceo*) and used material from the collection of prints and drawings of *naturalia* and *artificialia* in the process of painting the *Seven Sacraments*. When Poussin met Cassiano upon his arrival in Rome in 1624, Cassiano was working in Cardinal Francesco Barberini's household (nephew of newly elected Pope Urban VIII). See Cropper and Dempsey, *Nicolas Poussin*, 110-112.

> demonstration among the paintings of the late 1630s and 1640s of Poussin's study of Zaccolini's analysis of the specific problem of shadow projection.[50]

In comparison, Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego* provides a much tamer treatment of light and shadow within a composition. While the shadow of the shepherd and the incised letters remain potent images within the painting and are central to the meaning of the picture, they are also far removed from the precise geometry and dramatically cast shadows found in his contemporary *Eucharist*. Poussin relied on the same theoretical and practical understanding of light and shadow so emphatically demonstrated in the *Eucharist*, to make a far more understated painting in *Et in Arcadia Ego*.

Poussin produced two versions of the scene in the decades following Guercino's *Et in Arcadia Ego*. He painted the first in c. 1628 as a pendant for *Midas Washing at the Source of the Pactolus*. In this picture two shepherds and their female companion stand before a partially exposed sarcophagus and examine the inscription on its surface [Fig. 11]. A skull, far less prominent than the one in Guercino's painting, sits atop the tomb, surveying the scene of discovery and the surrounding Arcadian landscape. A river god reclines in the foreground of the picture. Scholars suggest that Poussin likely saw Guercino's *Et in Arcadia* before creating his own version, though the location of the earlier painting is unknown before 1644.[51] In their original pairing, Poussin's paintings were designed to convey a two-fold moral message regarding the vanity of riches and the transient nature of life.

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[50] Cropper and Dempsey, *Nicolas Poussin*, 169.

[51] Richard Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin 1594-1665* (London: Royal Academy of Arts; Zwemmer, 1995), 170-171, no. 13. And Pierre Rosenberg and Keith Christiansen, eds. *Poussin and Nature: Arcadian Visions* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008), 173-174, no. 21. Panofsky also suggests that Poussin "revised" Guercino's version: Panofsky, "*Et in Arcadia Ego*," 311.

Poussin painted his second, much celebrated, version in Rome in the late 1630s, possibly for Cardinal Giulio Rospigliosi, who commissioned several works from the artist in those years [Fig. 2].[52] As has been widely recognized, the second painting differs from the earlier Chatsworth picture both in style and mood. Several scholars state that the c. 1638-40 work does away with much of the movement present in the earlier painting, and they go so far as to insist that the moralizing intent of the *memento mori* has here vanished. Instead of fearing the symbolic import of the death head present in the Chatsworth painting, the inscribed message studied by the group of shepherds now allows them to contemplate the idea of Arcadia and the nature of death in a more detached way. Elizabeth Cropper and Charles Dempsey are strong proponents of this argument, stating the following in *Nicolas Poussin: Friendship and the Love of Painting*: "In Poussin's later, and canonical treatment of the subject, the death's head is absent, and gone with it, as Panofsky argued, is any lingering trace of moralizing intent. In its place there appears a profoundly Virgilian meditation of the idea of Arcadia itself…"[53] Richard Verdi too agrees with Panofsky's assessment that in the Louvre painting the shepherds are no longer warned of their own inevitable deaths, but instead are invited to take part in a "mellow meditation of a beautiful past."[54] Other scholars are more ambiguous as to the moral dimension of the later work, and the relationship between its message and the meaning of the earlier painting.[55]

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[52] Christopher Wright, *Poussin Paintings, A Catalogue Raisonné* (London: Chaucer Press, 2007), 150, no. 104. And Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin 1594-1665*, 218-219, no. 38.
See Verdi, 218 for Rospigliosi patronage theory. Anthony Blunt dates the painting much later, to the 1650s: Anthony Blunt, *The Paintings of Nicholas Poussin: A Critical Catalogue* (London: Phaidon Press, 1966), 81.
[53] Cropper and Dempsey, *Nicolas Poussin*, 308.
[54] Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin 1594-1665,* 218.
[55] For example, Wright thinks the painting has a moral dimension, the viewer should "ponder the concept of death and the idea of paradise" before the painting, but in a detached, unemotional

I remain hesitant, however, to categorize the first of Poussin's *Et in Arcadia* paintings as a *memento mori* and the second as merely contemplative. I suggest that both paintings, though quite different in style, work as devices that initiate a contemplation of death in a potentially moralizing way, and that they both represent the contemplative process as a substantially visual one.

Though it departs from the standard discussion of these pictures, vision as subject is present in both of Poussin's paintings, and much can be said about sight as it pertains to his compositions, both within the paintings and in the experience of the beholder. The sense of sight is clearly central to the contemplative acts undertaken by the shepherds in the paintings, particularly to the shepherds' intense study of the inscription on the tomb's surface in each work. Poussin was deeply interested in optics and the effects of light and shade. After coming to Rome in early 1624, he gained access (through Cassiano dal Pozzo) to the manuscripts on optics and perspective projection authored by Matteo Zaccolini.[56] In the mid 1630s, Poussin produced illustrations for Leonardo da Vinci's manuscript *Trattato della pittura*, which was published in 1651 due to the efforts of Cassiano.[57] As Poussin believed that the principles of optics should be taught to painters and then applied in their works, it is worthwhile to examine his own paintings in this light.[58]

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way. He writes that the Chatsworth picture depicts "sudden realization." Wright, *Poussin Paintings*, 161.
For Blunt, in Poussin's later version "all feeling of fear has vanished, and the shepherd and shepherdess contemplate death in undisturbed detachment, consonant with the principles of Stoicism." Anthony Blunt, *Nicholas Poussin*. The A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, 1958, National Gallery of Art, Washington (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1967), 304.
[56] Cropper and Dempsey, *Nicolas Poussin*, 110, 111.
[57] Cropper and Dempsey, *Nicolas Poussin*, 111, 168.
The efforts to edit and illustrate Leonardo's treatise were begun before 1635 and the project was completed between 1638-40: Bell, "Cassiano Dal Pozzo's Copy," 305.
[58] Cropper and Dempsey, *Nicolas Poussin*, 150.

In Louis Marin's 1980 essay entitled "Toward a Theory of Reading in the Visual Arts: Poussin's *The Arcadian Shepherds*," the French philosopher and art critic does treat the theme of looking fairly extensively in a theoretical mode.[59] He also provides an analysis of the pathways of sight formed by the figures in Poussin's later *Et in Arcadia* painting. Marin uses a diagram to map the network of gazes and accompanying gestures involved in the communicative exchange between the four figures arranged before the tomb.[60] Notated in the form of dashed straight lines and arrows, Marin's diagram represents in a highly abstracted form what is easily discernable in the painting—the standing shepherd on the left looks down toward the shepherd kneeling before the tomb, while the stooped shepherd cloaked in red directs his gaze toward the woman standing at the right, who too looks in toward the kneeling shepherd who works to decipher the inscription on the tomb's surface.

Though the diagram itself does not significantly add to our understanding of the work, it is interesting to think about these pathways of exchange in light of the optical theory with which Poussin was engaging. Rather than instrumentalizing optics by representing the theory of light and shadow or the science of vision at work, we see in this painting the intellectual fruits of his studies. The inscription "ET IN ARCADIA EGO" incised in paint on the surface of the tomb is visible to the viewers both within and outside of the picture due to the light and shadow that the carved letters produce [Fig. 12]. Poussin's observations regarding light and shadow in his theoretical pursuits are here expressed in his rendering of the inscription. Poussin crafts a composition that takes as its subject the pursuit of knowledge through visual observation. Acts

[59] Marin, "Toward A Theory of Reading in the Visual Arts," 293-324.
Also see Marin, 296, 298 for his discussion of how a viewer "reads" a painted composition and turns the representational model into an understandable language.
[60] Marin, "Toward A Theory of Reading in the Visual Arts," 311.

of close looking experienced in the painting prompt the contemplative process that in turn leads to a deeper understanding of life, death, or the concept of Arcadia.

In his essay, Marin also argues that because none of the figures look out towards the beholder, the viewer's only engagement with the work is to observe the narrative being enacted within it. "As viewers-readers we just catch the figures performing their narrative functions…We are only the distant spectators of a story."[61] Though one layer of the beholder's experience does involve observing the painted scene, she also necessarily undergoes a parallel experience to that of the shepherds in order to gain a deeper understanding of the scene, and of the inevitability of death. The viewer, too, can engage in the same sight lines of communication that the figures enact, culminating in the center of the composition. Here, the kneeling shepherd examines the inscribed words "*Et in Arcadia Ego*" through the senses of sight and touch. His shadow falls on the surface of the tomb he examines, perhaps referencing his own mortality.

Lawrence Steefel Jr. contributes an important element to Marin's discussion of vision within the painting as his argument emphasizes the *memento mori* nature of the picture. In his article "A Neglected Shadow in Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego*," Steelfel states that the cast shadow in the center of the composition not only

> speak[s] to what is in the tomb but it binds the shepherd unconsciously to the mortality that he, at this moment, attributes to another person. As an adumbration of his own mortality that we see and foresee here, the shepherd is not only involved in a shadowed existence that he does not yet see or fully understand, but also, by extension, provokes a kind of subliminal inclusion of the intelligent spectator.[62]

[61] Marin, "Toward A Theory of Reading in the Visual Arts," 305-306.
[62] Steefel Jr., "A Neglected Shadow," 101.

In Steefel's analysis, the beholder becomes involved in a deeper understanding of the shepherds' mortality, and by extension her own, by acknowledging the presence of the man's shadow as it falls on the tomb and the phrase inscribed there. The shepherds themselves may or may not explicitly recognize their own proximity to death, but the viewer has the tools to make that connection, mapping the shadow of the kneeling shepherd onto the contents of the tomb. The painting, which contains all of the elements of a *memento mori*, only reaches its full meaning when penetrated by the eyes of the beholder.

The shadow in the center of Poussin's composition may also refer to the myth of the potter Butades, who made the first sculpted portrait from his daughter's tracing of her lover's shadow.[63] The shadow in this story allows man to make the impermanent permanent, the craftsman having captured the image of the lover from his ephemeral shadow, and translating the form into fired clay. Further, the shadow can be viewed as an object intimately connected to the individual that produces it.[64] Beyond physically representing a person, the shadow can be considered as part of the person. In Poussin's painting, the shepherd's shadow on the tomb works to bring together the vital man present in the picture, and the inevitable death that the inscribed tomb represents.

Compared to his first *Et in Arcadia* painting, which features a skull atop the tomb and more animated movement by the shepherds, Poussin's second version conveys its moralizing message in a more subtle way. But both paintings enact the same process of gaining

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[63] Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History,* XXXV, 43 (12) ed. John Bostock and H. T. Riley, in the Perseus Digital Library, http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.02.0137:book=35:chapter=43&highlight=butades (accessed July 17, 2018).

[64] Maurizio Bettini, *The Portrait of the Lover*, trans. by Laura Gibbs (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1999), 42-43.

understanding through visual means, and elicit similar reactions from the beholder. More so than in Guercino's *Et in Arcadia Ego* work, Poussin's later painting leaves the contemplative experience of both the subjects and the beholder open-ended. While Poussin was situated at the center of seventeenth-century Roman interest in the function of the eye and visual processes, working alongside men like Cassiano dal Pozzo and reading the optical treastises of Matteo Zaccolini and Leonardo da Vinci, the painter refrains from transcribing this body of knowledge directly into the painting. In this picture about seeing, and about the liminal space between seeing and understanding, he instead creates a more ambiguous work that remains open to continued contemplation. Part of his project, begun with the first version, seems to be playing with how subtly he can convey the confrontation with death in a moral, contemplative way.

The paintings discussed in this paper are united by their treatment of the *memento mori* theme. Significantly, both Guercino and Poussin relied on processes of vision both in the act of representing death in their paintings, and to impart a message to the beholder. Before these pictures, viewers witness optics at work and are confronted with evidence of what can be revealed through vision. In this period, Rome was rife with efforts to penetrate the unknown world through visual means. Optical instruments were key to the project of probing the unknown, and continued to be refined throughout the seventeenth century. A greater understanding of the eye and the process of sight accompanied these efforts. Work on light and shadow, like the investigations performed by Zaccolini, specifically linked optics to the making and reception of art works. In the *memento mori* paintings discussed here, a crucial relationship between death, sight, and knowledge is forged. To begin to understand death we must look. Close visual attention and ruminating on the part of the beholder are rewarded with knowledge,

with a deeper understanding of the concept of death/mortality as it relates to the body and soul of the beholder.

Notably, Guercino and Poussin were the only artists in the seventeenth century to paint scenes that included the Latin phrase *Et in Arcadia ego*.[65] The phrase itself, as used by these artists, designates the paintings as *memento mori*. But it is the act of seeing the inscription, either for the subjects within the paintings, the viewers, or both, that prompts contemplation on the place of death within Arcadian paradise. Crucially, vision is the conduit by which the inscribed message is transferred to the viewer, and therefore key to the contemplative process that culminates in a greater understanding of death for the beholder. Before the paintings, the beholder must rely solely on visual observation, on the play of light and shadow that illuminates the inscription's depth, to apprehend the meaning of the both the phrase and the paintings themselves.

[65] In fact, no visual representations of the phrase "Et in arcadia ego" are known to exist before Guercino paints his c. 1618 work.

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Figures:

Figure 1: Guercino, *Et in Arcadia Ego*, c. 1618, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica of Rome. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 2: Nicolas Poussin, *Et in Arcadia Ego*, c. 1638-1640, Louvre, Paris. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

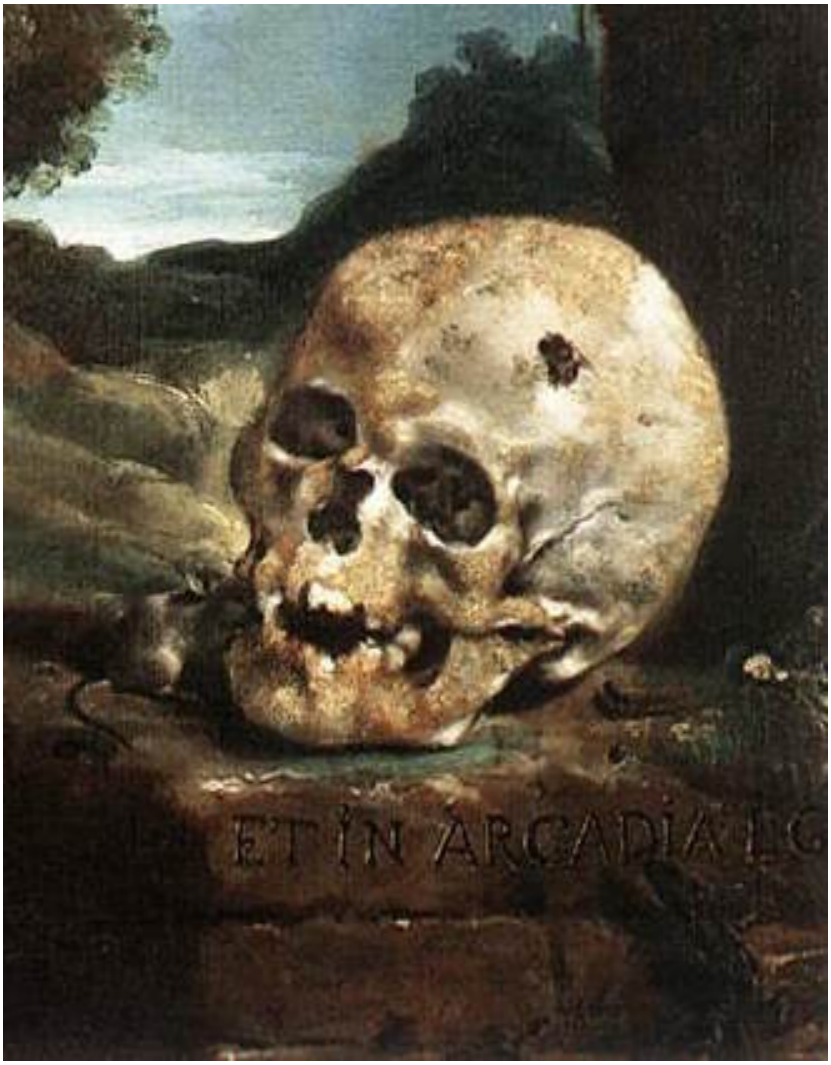

Figure 3: Guercino, *Et in Arcadia Ego*, c. 1618, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica of Rome, detail. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 4: Guercino, *Night*, 1621, Casino Ludovisi, Rome. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 5: Caravaggio, *Jupiter, Neptune, and Pluto*, c. 1597, Casino Ludovisi, Rome. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 6: Athanasius Kircher, frontispiece to *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae,* 1646, Rome. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 7: Guercino, Archimedes deflecting rays of sun, drawing, c. 1621-1623, British Museum. Source: British Museum.

Figure 8: Guercino (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri), Italian, 1591–1666
Bearded old man (Astrologer), shown half-length, with an astrolabe
Pen, brown ink and gray and brown wash
19.3 x 23.5 cm. (7 5/8 x 9 1/4 in.)
Princeton University Art Museum. Bequest of Dan Fellows Platt, Class of 1895
artmuseum.princeton.edu

Figure 9: Guercino (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri), Italian, 1591–1666
Cosmographer, ca. 1660
Black chalk on cream laid paper
26 x 19.3 cm. (10 1/4 x 7 5/8 in.)
Princeton University Art Museum. Bequest of Dan Fellows Platt, Class of 1895
artmuseum.princeton.edu

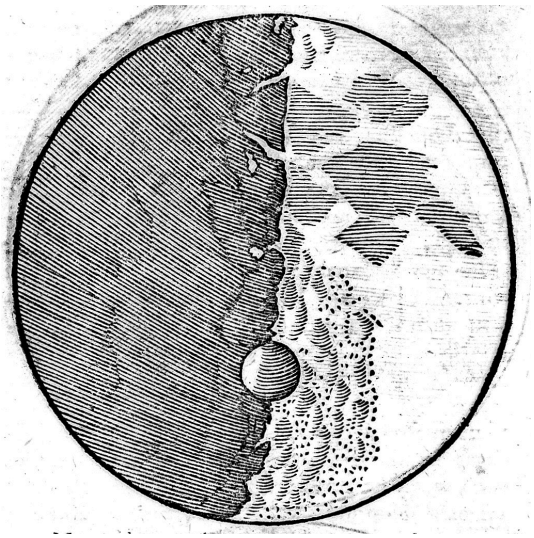

Figure 10: Galileo Galilei, *Telescopic Studies of the Moon*, from *Sidereus Nuncius*, 1610. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 11: Poussin, *The Arcadian Shepherds*, c. 1628, The Duke of Devonshire and the Chatsworth Settlement Trustees. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

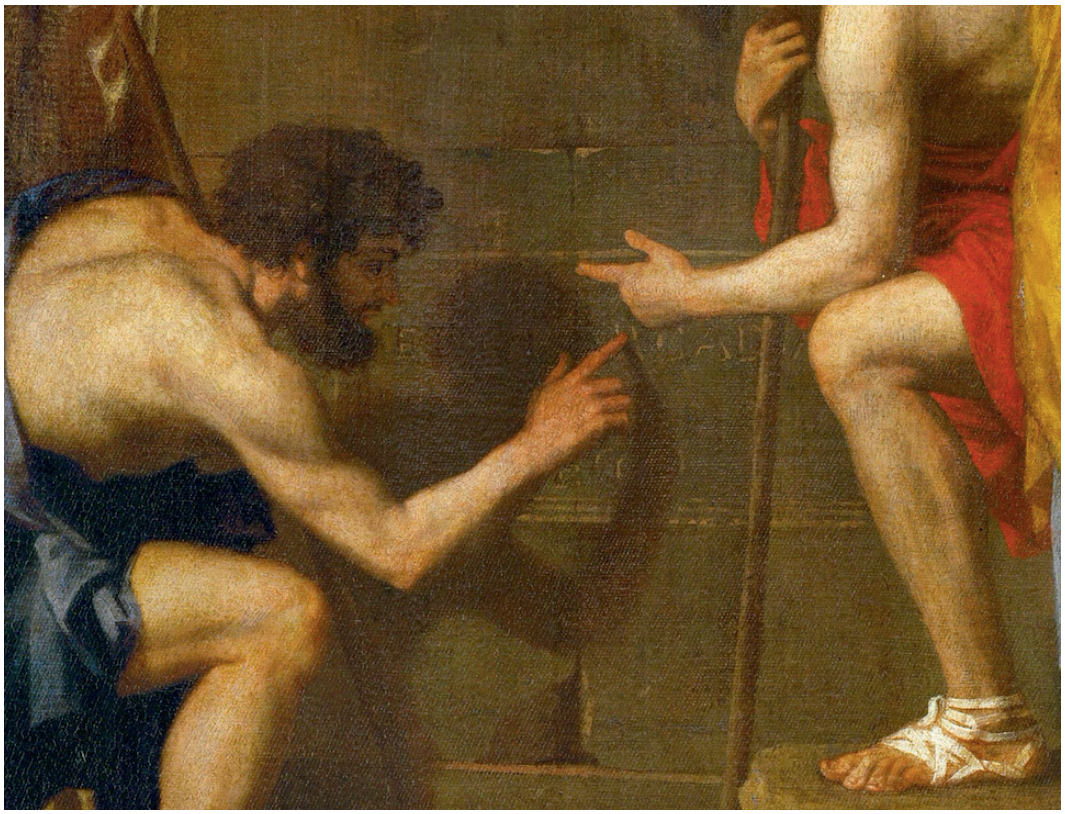

Figure 12: Poussin, *Et in Arcadia Ego*, c. 1638-1640, Louvre, Paris, detail. Source: Wikimedia Commons.