

‘Entombment’:

Moretto da Brescia’s Command of Obedience

Sandra Carpenter

In a Tortoiseshell: *In this essay on Moretto da Brescia’s painting ‘Entombment,’ the author transitions seamlessly between descriptive **orienting** and insightful **analysis**. Using **evidence** in the form of the painting’s scenery, figures, and lighting, she argues for the nuanced depiction of instantaneous and eternal anguish in the representation of Christ and the Virgin Mary.*

Excerpt

Moretto da Brescia magnifies the viewer’s sense of Christ’s and Mary’s anguish through a fabrication of time, expanding upon the single moment portrayed in this iconic scene in order to stress the timeless suffering endured for a child conceived as a sacrifice.

Placed against the backdrop of a dusky sky giving way to night—itsself a symbol for the twilight of Christ’s life—are three crosses elevated on a hill, distanced from the figures by the illusion of perspective: namely, a dirt path that winds down from the mountaintop, indicating the great length in space and time required to drag the body from its site of death on the central cross. Despite the physical valley that grounds the crosses in the past, Christ’s experience of agony is still very much palpable in the present: deep wounds mar his hands and feet, rivulets of blood emerge from his hairline, and his wide, vulnerable pose with hanging head exactly mirrors the position of crucifixion. Moreover, the material instruments of his torment—a set of three nails and a crown of thorns—are exhibited behind the body in shadow as sinful relics of the Passion, serving as concurrent manifestations of mankind’s cruel persecution and Christ’s selfless martyrdom.

The Virgin’s grief in the present is readily visible in the harsh aging of her face and the desolation in her helpless gaze, but Moretto da Brescia also captures the burden she assumed by bringing a child into the world to die. The arrangement of her hands over Christ’s chest and protruding abdomen functions as an allusion to her pregnancy, symbolizing a full circle of suffering that started from his birth and culminates in his fated death. Mary’s corporeal intimacy with Christ, their bodies nested and her face revealed only as his head bows, humanizes her maternal grief as she holds her infant one last time. The artist’s choice to position Mary here with her arms cradling Jesus, a presentation that has echoes of Madonna and Child, illustrates his intention of emphasizing her faith and diligence in fulfilling God’s will even if obedience meant ultimately bearing witness to the murder of her son.

In comparison to the lavish clothing of the surrounding figures, Christ’s nakedness intensifies his abasement through humiliation and exposure. As a result of this nudity, Jesus’s pallid skin—a clear sign of death—is directly accentuated by the placement of Mary’s warm, pink hands over his body and the contrast created by her dark tunic. Furthermore, this bare skin, pulled taught across sinews to depict the anatomy of starvation, mimics the stone-like fabric hanging at his waist and the boulders of the

background, evoking a sculptural quality reminiscent of Michelangelo's white marble *Pieta*. This effect also foreshadows the body's final resting place within rock. Death, both past and present, is concealed in the painting's complex narrative, and so is the future of Christ's mortal remnants embodied by the deep, black crevice that will serve as his earthen tomb. Literally, the painting's parade of lamenters has reached the road's end, colliding into the plane of the foreground; metaphorically, the stone tablet and its inscription also mark the end of Christ's purpose on earth—to die obediently for the sins of humanity—and thereby symbolize the last milestone his body must cross to fulfill God's bidding within its grave.

Author Commentary

Sandra Carpenter

I was very fortunate to have stumbled across this small, humble painting hanging in the shadows of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. At once, I realized the parallels between Moretto da Brescia's masterpiece and Raphael's impressive *Deposition*, but the somber *Entombment* held its own and filled with me an inescapable sense of loss and despair. The artist had delved deeper than the surface of Christ's cold flesh—he had encrypted death and its associated grief within an eternal “historia,” or a painting defined by its narrative. Thus, in writing my formal analysis, I attempted to follow this story, allowing the figures, or rather the characters, to lead my writing through space and time to the moment they waited together for the inevitable burial of their savior.

However, underlying my dedication to the narrative was my struggle in the writing process as I sought to internalize and communicate a story that was not my own, a story that meant very little to me but had formed the morals, purpose, and mindset of so many, then and now. This one timeless story could provide answers for meaningless suffering, for the mercy and passion of the Lord, for the questions that our mortality necessarily brings. Could I dissect and speak loftily about this story if I felt removed from the Virgin's grief and the torment of her son; was I qualified to speak if I had never clutched for religion in the darkness of great suffering? This fear that I could not wholly comprehend and express the message of *Entombment* if I was not religious was my greatest adversity in the writing process.

Above all, I aimed to portray the difficult questions that Moretto da Brescia addresses and presents to his viewers in *Entombment*. In this way, art during the Renaissance functioned as an essential tool to ponder and clarify the uncertainties of life and death. In much the same way, I used the formal elements of *Entombment* to guide my thinking during writing, carefully interpreting the medium in order to explain the profound meaning of this painting not only to my readers but also to myself.

Fellow Commentary

Myrial Holbrook

Writing about art is a tricky mix of precise, objective description and expressive, subjective analysis. In her essay about Moretto da Brescia's *Entombment*, Sandy Carpenter pulls off this mix superbly. She nuances an effective claim about the portrayal of anguish through a fabrication of time in the painting. Her claim is effective because of her treatment of the medium: instead of imposing an argument on the painting, Sandy groups her vivid descriptions for optimal argumentative impact. Her essay shows that, when analyzing in medium, description itself can serve as compelling evidence.

Notice how she builds her evidence first with “the backdrop of a dusky sky.” Here she is setting the scene for the reader while slyly sneaking in some evidence—the winding dirt path that marks both space and time. From this more expansive view of the painting, she zooms in to the figures of Christ, then the Virgin Mary, then Christ again.

Some writers might have been tempted to simply devote one paragraph each to the portrayal of Christ and Mary for simplicity's sake. But here, Sandy takes an interesting turn with structure, first discussing Christ's “palpable” agony, then the Virgin's grief, and finally Christ's “abasement.” In this way, she revisits what she has already established in earlier paragraphs but can extend her analysis further, fully integrating her landscape and figure descriptions with the impactful description of the “road's end” of the painting and Christ's purpose on earth. She is touching on similar aspects of the painting as in her earlier paragraphs, but her analysis is in no way redundant. It is fluid and connected with a slight flair of the unexpected, such as the comparison of Christ with Michelangelo's white marble *Pieta*.

In writing about visual art, it can sometimes be difficult not to overburden the reader with florid description in order to provide sufficient orienting. However, as Sandy shows in this essay, description need not be confined to orienting. Description can also work wonders in the structure and substance of argument. When analyzing in medium, description is perhaps most effective in that it imparts the essence of the subject matter—and thus enhanced understanding—to writer and reader alike.

Appendix A



Figure 1. Moretto da Brescia, *The Entombment*, oil on canvas, 1554, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/12.61/>

Works Cited

Alberti, Leon Battista *Excerpt* On painting and On sculpture. The Latin texts of De pictura and De statua [by] Leon Battista Alberti. Edited with translations, introduction and notes by Cecil Grayson, 1972, pp. 72-75.

da Brescia, Moretto, *The Entombment*, oil on canvas, 1554, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/12.61/>

Bios

Sandra Carpenter '18 is from Ridgefield, CT, and lives to pet dogs, preferably poodles. She has a black labradoodle named Roxy—oh, and two brothers, one of whom will be joining her next year at Princeton! Sandy is a MOL major and pre-med who aspires to be a reconstructive surgeon. She is also getting the visual arts certificate and exploring the metaphors of disability through her portraits. Around Princeton, you can find her at the boathouse rowing on the lightweight team, hanging out with her roommate Sara, or following strangers with cute dogs around campus. She wrote this essay as a sophomore.

Myrial Holbrook '19, in addition to serving as an editor for *Tortoise*, is also a Fellow in the Writing Center, Managing Editor of Innovation, a staff writer and assistant editor for *The Nassau Literary Review*, a Princeton Business Volunteer, a Sustainable Engineering and Development Scholar, and a Community House Big Sib. She hails from Columbus, Ohio and is majoring in Comparative Literature (a convenient catch-all for her dabblings in English, Spanish, Chinese, history, journalism, and creative writing) and contemplating certificates in Cognitive Science and Environmental Studies. She wrote this as a sophomore.