Magic, Myth, and Mystery: The Puzzle of Samuel Anointing Saul

Samuel Anointing Saul, or the Anointment of Saul, is an oil on canvas painting measuring 118 by 152 centimeters in the collection of the Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge. It is generally thought to be the work of François de Nomé, a French artist living in Italy, done sometime between 1625 and 1650.[1] The painting depicts the Biblical scene of the prophet Samuel anointing the first king of Israel. In the lower left corner, two other men sit, observing. The figures, however, are dwarfed by the structures rising up around them: a column, arch, wall, and tower, all in the Roman style, and all in various states of ruin. They are adorned by bright, white statues that contrast against the darker grays of the painting. The entire mood of the scene is one of peculiar desolation. Samuel and Saul seem alone in an apocalyptic world, surrounded by a strange mix of Christian and pagan mythologies. Everything about the painting, including its history, has an eerie aspect. In this essay, I will examine this ghostly quality, with tools of both historical and formal analysis, in order to grapple with some of the painting’s peculiarities.

Samuel Anointing Saul has only been attributed to François de Nomé for the past few decades. Bernardo de Dominci, an eighteenth-century art historian, ascribed this work, along with many others, to a Monsù Desiderio, a French painter working in Naples. The title monsù was given to foreigners in the Spanish-held Naples, and desiderio means “desire.” Thus, the figure of Monsù Desiderio was from the beginning an enigma: an outsider wrapped in the blurry imagery of passion and adoration, and paralleling the mystery of the painting itself. In 1956, art historian Raffaelo Causa, after a critical inquiry based off of signed documents and canvases, asserted that Monsù Desiderio was actually two separate artists: Didier Barra and François de Nomé.[2] Causa’s theory is now widely accepted, but De Nomé’s association with Monsù Desiderio makes it difficult to speak authoritatively about his life. He probably was born in Metz, France in 1593, quickly went to Rome to study under Maestro Baldassare, a painter from Antwerp, before moving to Naples in around 1610. He became a successful artist there before dying sometime after 1643.[3]

Although François de Nomé’s name was lost for three centuries, when it reemerged it was quickly associated with the occult -- his full name was never to be said lest the evil eye be summoned, rumors swirled about fires in museums housing his work, and those studying his paintings supposedly experienced “accidents.”[4] This eeriness extends not only to the painter but also to the history of the painting. It was in the possession of Oscar Bondy, a Jewish businessman living in Austria, when his entire collection was stolen by the Germans during WWII. After the war, Bondy’s widow fought a long, and mostly successful,
effort for the return of the collection. It is unclear what exactly happened to the Anointment (it does not appear in inventory documents with other works from the collection), but in 1953 it resurfaced and was purchased by Paul and Gabriele Geier in Rome, and was then bequeathed to the Harvard Art Museums in 2012. Thus, any understanding of this painting should acknowledge its long and turbulent history. It has been associated with a host of different circumstances, as well as emotions inspiring passion, sorrow, malevolence, and fear. At some level these myriad emotions literally play into the uncanny nature of the painting today.

Much of the strangeness of the Anointment comes from the sense that the humans in it are almost irrelevant to the scene. The story of Saul, from the Old Testament, is a seminal moment in the mytho-history of Christianity. It establishes a line of kings with the divine right to rule Israel. Yet the moment is lost among the maze of buildings and statues that take up the scene. The two central figures are painted in blues and deep browns, which contrast against the gray landscape and murky background. But even the blue is a light blue that fades into the setting. Any attempt to lift the sinister grayness that washes over the entire painting is feeble. Dominating the scene is the massive arch, while the central column in the foreground and the tower in the background draw the eyes upward, away from the bent figures on the ground. Samuel and Saul almost seem peripheral, minor characters in the painting. They are not the focus as much as the crumbling buildings, a strange (and almost heretical) perspective on an important moment in Biblical history. Lois Parkinson Zamora writes that another of de Nomé’s works depicts “human beings overwhelmed by historical forces they neither created nor control.” Similarly here, the figures of Samuel and Saul are overwhelmed by the weight of the ruins.

Just as the identity of the painter is uncertain, scholars are still unsure about the identity of the buildings in the Anointment. Maria Rosaria Nappi identifies the column in the foreground as a colonna coclide, a type of honorary column with spiraled scenes common in ancient Rome. She notes the similarities between the arch in the painting and the triumphal arch of Marcus Aurelius, and also theorizes that the structure in the background is the Septizodium, a decorative façade built in Rome by the Emperor Septimius Severus. But de Nomé departs from the actual and enters into the fantastical. Although the buildings are all inspired by pre-Christian Rome, the reliefs depict Biblical scenes. Moreover, the small statues on the arch are obscured by shadow, but appear to be wearing masks, shrouding them in mystery. The buildings themselves are drawn in a strange perspective that makes them seem like “the ruins of buildings that could never have been built in the first place.” This element of fantasy is not incongruous with de Nomé’s background and residence in Naples. At the time, Naples was the largest city in southern Europe, crowded with foreigners and bursting with both extreme wealth and poverty. It was a city of contradictions (prostitutes worked from the haven of a convent) and fervency. It had in its popular culture an aspect of the pagan or magical -- a fascination with superstitions,
witchcraft, and “theatrical séances” -- that was reflected in art through visual tricks and unexpected textures. De Nomé incorporated this element into his work by “blur[ing] the boundaries of reality.”[13] In the Anointment, the structures exist in the world between real and unreal, with historical influences but fantastical distortions.

But more than just a warping of reality, the buildings are a twisted version of the classical ideal of beauty. Many of the statues, symbols of Greece and Rome, lay fallen or are missing from the niches where they should stand, a testament to the invincibility of time over man’s creations. A spindly tree branch grows out of the lofty column, and several crenellations are absent from the wall’s fortifications. Many other structures are crumbling, with deep cracks running through the sides. The white statues seem almost like “ghosts,” and the scene of ruin could be interpreted as a “sweeping allegory of the decay and death of Western civilization.”[14] This theme of destruction could again hark back to de Nomé’s years in Naples, a city afflicted by a series of disasters in its history, including the plague, a volcanic eruption, and multiple earthquakes.[15] But, as Philippe Malgouyres points out, episodes of destruction may not be entirely negative. Catastrophes can sometimes be fortuitous (the sack of Troy led to the founding of Rome) and can be seen as the natural manifestation of the order of the universe and God’s supremacy over humans.[16] In this view, art is a way to make sense of a perilous world. There are few clues about whether the Anointment makes a statement about the decline of the West or affirms God’s role as destroyer and creator. But in either case, it is a scene of destruction and despair.

Viewing the painting is almost like stepping into a dystopian world — man-made structures are crumbling, it is difficult to discern reality from fantasy, and humans are left vulnerable by the ravages of time. And like so many other dystopian visions, Samuel Anointing Saul could be viewed as a social commentary. This idea is not as far-fetched as it sounds. Zamora states that “the baroque is subversive” (emphasis in original) due to its dynamism and distortion of classicism.[17] The painting’s depiction of a destroyed classical scene where men have little importance is anathema to the ideals of the Renaissance, when the humanist worldview was triumphant and the ancient times were glorified. And because it is two ostensibly powerful figures, a king and a priest, who are left powerless, the painting might even encourage the disintegration of rigid hierarchical systems. Such a thought is plausible for a painter who was born in Metz, near the German border, and whose first master was from the Protestant North. Indeed, Nappi speculates that de Nomé’s Old Testament themes, which often include episodes of abuses by rulers, could be inspired by the Protestant Reformation.[18] And in Naples, city of disasters and witchcraft, anything could have been possible, even the success of a foreign artist who painted scenes of destruction and eschewed traditional norms of the Renaissance and Catholicism. Perhaps this vision of dissent and subversion is why de Nomé’s work is still intriguing today.
Bibliography


Samuel Anointing Saul by François de Nomé; 1625–1650


[8] Nappi, François De Nomé e Didier Barra, 111.


[16] Ibid., 118–119.


[18] Nappi, François De Nomé e Didier Barra, 34.