Sacred Flame: Meditative Mysticism in the Works of Georges de La Tour

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SACRED FLAME:
MEDITATIVE MYSTICISM IN THE WORKS OF GEORGE DE LA TOUR

BY
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SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF
BACHELOR OF ARTS

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INTRODUCTION

Georges de La Tour (1593-1652) is notoriously difficult to situate within the tradition of French Baroque painting, which is itself a problematic category. Compared to the Italian, Spanish, and Northern Baroque traditions, French Baroque painting has very strong classical overtones, to the point where many French intellectuals dispute the periodizations of “baroque” and “classicism” in French art dating after the Renaissance and before the Revolution.¹ La Tour is part of a limited circle of early French Baroque artists whose work shows a clear tenebrism in the Caravaggesque mode. Art historians have identified several clear influences on La Tour’s work, including the Baroque master Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610), the Dutch Caravaggist school, and French Mannerism.² However, even among other French tenebrists, La Tour’s work, particularly his later nocturnes, has a unique, “mystical” quality which has captivated the world since their rediscovery by Hermann Voss in 1915.³

The stillness and meditative intensity of La Tour’s religious nocturnes belie the chaos of his milieu; during his lifetime, his home territory of Lorraine, which is today a region in the northeast of France, was ravaged by war, religious conflict, and epidemics. The Counter Reformation raged through Europe during the 16th and 17th Centuries along with the religious wars between Catholic and Protestant countries, including the French Wars of Religion (1562-1598).⁴ In a time when Jesuit religious practices were on the rise and Christian mysticism dominated Lorraine, what is La Tour’s spiritual and theological position as an artist? In my senior thesis, I will argue that La Tour’s religious nocturnes display a unique solemnity and

⁴ “Counter-Reformation,” Encyclopaedia Britannica (2020).
meditative quality which is closely linked to the emergence of meditative practice in Christian theology. La Tour’s nocturnes invoke personal meditation on death and on the sufferings of Christ, as recommended by Jesuit religious practices. His paintings parallel the rich textual symbolism and quiet, internal passion of contemporary French mystic writings. La Tour focuses the intensity of Counter Reformation spirituality into a career-long dedication to representing the elevation of the human soul.

In framing this argument, it is important to note that one of the reasons La Tour’s artistic positionality and intentions remain nebulous is a lack of contemporary sources and biographical information about his professional or personal life as an artist. La Tour scholars attempting to answer questions about La Tour’s training and specific influences have been consistently stymied by the scarcity of surviving documents; paradoxically, there is more documentation about his personal life than about his artistic life. For the purposes of my thesis, I will not detail the specifics of La Tour’s biography except to provide relevant context. In the introduction to his 1992 monograph on La Tour, French art historian Jacques Thuillier warns against the temptation to analyze La Tour psychologically, economically, or sociologically, given the dearth of available biography: “The case of Georges de La Tour recalls art history to its true purpose and its only valid method: to concentrate on the artist’s work, accepting it for the irreducible entity it is, while diversifying the approaches…useful in shedding some light on it.” With this advice in mind, I will take a cultural and theological approach to contribute to the elucidation of La Tour’s

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7 Thuillier, Georges de La Tour, 11.
work by analyzing the development of his oeuvre in relation to the theological factors at work in 17th Century Lorraine.

CHAPTER 1: The Early Secular Works (1616-1630)

While La Tour would become most widely known for the religious nocturnes he favored later in his career, his early career is marked by genre painting, or scenes of ordinary people in everyday life, which are important in developing the context for his later religious paintings. His secular works show the clear influence of Caravaggism and French Mannerism.\(^8\) La Tour painted religious subjects from the beginning of his career, but as he gained maturity as an artist, he began favoring them more strongly and developed a highly original style. It is important to examine La Tour’s early work to understand the shift that occurred in the 1630s. It is difficult to precisely date La Tour’s paintings, since his career is not well-documented, with no dated works, and several paintings only survive as copies of which the originals have been lost. With the available chronology, it is possible to divide his career into two phases: his early works of roughly 1616 to 1630, which favor Caravaggism and dramatic realism, and his mature career, c. 1630 to his death in 1652, characterized by stillness, idealization, and a departure from daylight scenes to nocturnes.

La Tour was born in Vic-sur-Seille, Lorraine, in 1593, the second son of a baker. In 1617, he married a young noblewoman named Diane le Nerf, a remarkable rise in status. La Tour would spend most of his life in his wife’s hometown of Lunéville, near Nancy.\(^9\) One important unanswered question among scholars is what artistic training La Tour underwent between his


\(^9\) Furness, Georges de La Tour, 15.
birth and his marriage (the next recorded mention of him, at which time he described himself as an *artiste*), and further the question of whether La Tour himself ever visited Rome. Furness argues that his painting style is strong evidence that he did in fact visit Rome:

[T]here can be very little doubt that he made his student’s ‘peregrinatio’ to Italy, and to Rome itself... Hence, then, his large-scale ‘close-up’ figure composition, with no foreground and undetailed background. Hence, his ‘Tenebrism.’

However, other scholars are less convinced, including André Chastel, a leading scholar of French Renaissance and Baroque art. Whether or not La Tour made the trip to Italy, there is a clear connection between Caravaggio and La Tour. Caravaggio shaped and defined tenebrism in Baroque art, and the effects of his work echo in European art throughout the seventeenth century and beyond. If La Tour did not directly view Caravaggio’s work for himself, he may have encountered tenebrism and gritty, Caravaggesque realism through the Dutch Caravaggisti.

Around the time that La Tour was first active as an artist, Caravaggism was widespread in Europe, particularly in Lorraine’s Protestant neighbors, Holland and Flanders. La Tour’s early work appears to be highly influenced by the Utrecht School:

[Caravaggio’s] method of illumination of the whole picture, or the most salient parts, by torch or candlelight de la Tour must have learnt from Caravaggio’s followers of the Netherlands, particularly of the Utrecht school, who more than any others outside of Italy popularised, unfortunately also vulgarised, the Tenebrist style. Chief among these were Hendrik TerBrugghen (1581-1623), Gherard van Honthorst (1590-1656), and the teacher of both of these, Abraham Bloemaert (1564-1651).

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12 Furness, *Georges de La Tour*, 17, 18.
16 Furness, *Georges de La Tour*, 18.
In addition to the tenebrist style, characterized by dramatic illumination and stark contrast between light and dark, another potential link between La Tour and the Dutch and Flemish Caravaggists was his preference for mysterious night scenes lit by fire. For the most part, Caravaggio did not paint candlelit scenes, preferring naturalistic daylight or theatrical interior lighting. However, candlelight and nocturnes were common within the Utrecht school. La Tour employs a similar kind of social satire, which Chastel calls ‘sarcastic realism,’ finding humor in scenes of low life. This type of satire could have come to La Tour either from Caravaggio directly or from the Dutch Caravaggisti. However, interestingly enough, La Tour’s later career had a somewhat similar projection and development to Caravaggio’s; both artists transitioned from favoring baudy, secular subjects early in their artistic careers to portraying almost entirely religious subjects in their mature careers. As the French monarchy and the Church asserted their power over the region of Lorraine, La Tour accepted religious commissions at a higher frequency and perhaps shifted his painting style to reflect the tastes of the French court for more idealized figures.

La Tour’s early works show a strong resemblance to Caravaggio’s early secular paintings. The themes of theft, gambling, and realistic squalor, seen in Caravaggio and in the Dutch Caravaggisti, were adapted by La Tour:

[T]he young La Tour first favored the ‘sarcastic realism’ promoted by the Caravaggists through cave-like scenes of lowlife. La Tour might have come into contact with this poetic ambiguity, cynical descriptiveness, and unsettling if enchanting luminosity either in Lorraine (where the strange Jacques Bellange was working), or Rome (if he indeed made the trip… between 1616 and 1620), or quite simply the Netherlands, where Honthort’s nocturnal scenes and Terbrugghen’s burlesque images were well-known.18

Chastel suggests that La Tour’s Peasant, Peasant’s Wife, The Payment of Dues, and The Beggars’ Brawl, all dated around 1625, belong to this part of La Tour’s career. The figures La

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17 Thuillier, Georges de La Tour, 102-105.
Tour represents in his early genre paintings are often common genre character types, but depicted with great care and specificity; La Tour may have taken inspiration from the Lorrainese peasants and townspeople he encountered in daily life.\textsuperscript{19} Even in his early works, La Tour displays a great sensitivity and attention to the representation of humanity, a tendency which he carried into his later religious works. The chief distinction is that La Tour’s early genre works display the foibles and flaws of ordinary people, while his religious paintings elevate the human form and soul to an idealized holiness.

La Tour’s \textit{The Beggars’ Brawl}\textsuperscript{20} (fig. 1) depicts a group of five shabby musicians engaged in a scuffle; several of them appear ready to stealthily weaponize their instruments, while one man in the foreground pulls a short knife. The scene has a dynamism and a momentary quality typical of Baroque painting. The painting is dimly lit and evidently takes place at night (one example of La Tour’s strong preference for nocturnal scenes). As in Caravaggio’s works, the light source is ambiguous and the figures emerge dramatically from the darkness. While the subject matter of \textit{The Beggars’ Brawl} is more closely related to Caravaggio’s \textit{The Fortune Teller}\textsuperscript{21}, the strong \textit{tenebroso} resembles Caravaggio’s \textit{Conversion on the Way to Damascus}.\textsuperscript{22} \textit{The Beggars’ Brawl} is gritty and almost grotesque in its realism; the faces of the men are shown in unflattering detail, calling to mind Goliath’s head in Caravaggio’s \textit{David with the Head of Goliath}\textsuperscript{23}. If La Tour was in fact not directly inspired by Caravaggio’s works in creating nocturnal paintings like \textit{The Beggars’ Brawl}, he may have seen the work of the Dutch Caravaggisti. Honthorst’s \textit{Feast with a Lute Player}\textsuperscript{24} (fig. 2) shares similar realism and an earthy

\textsuperscript{19} Conisbee, “An Introduction to the Life and Art of Georges de La Tour,” 28.
\textsuperscript{20} Georges de La Tour, \textit{The Musicians’ Brawl}, c. 1625-1630, oil on canvas, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.
\textsuperscript{22} Caravaggio, \textit{Conversion on the Way to Damascus}, 1601, oil on canvas, Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome.
\textsuperscript{23} Caravaggio, \textit{David with the Head of Goliath}, 1610, Villa Borghese, Rome.
\textsuperscript{24} Gerrit van Honthorst, \textit{Feast with a Lute Player}, 1620, Uffizi, Florence.
color scheme. As well, La Tour’s early genre paintings employ satire and a sense of humor, embodied in stock characters of his time period. His religious paintings invoke a similar sense of wry self-consciousness, although this self-consciousness is transmuted into self-reflection and repentance.

David Franklin and Sebastian Schütze propose that Caravaggio’s *The Cardsharps* 25 (fig. 3) is a strong point of reference between Caravaggio and La Tour, showing the range of Caravaggio’s artistic influence. Like *The Cardsharps*, La Tour’s *The Cheat with the Ace of Diamonds* 26 (fig. 4) portrays a small group of people at a game of cards, with a trickster in the foreground pulling a card secretly from behind his back. As ever, the question is whether La Tour studied directly from Caravaggio’s paintings or whether the style was indirectly transmuted to him from the north:

The frozen action of the painting at the climactic moment of deception may be traced to Caravaggio. Just how La Tour achieved his inspired treatment of the subjects remains a mystery, but the theme was clearly transmitted by the Roman followers of Caravaggio returning to Northern Europe. The stillness of the figures, the abstraction of the illuminated faces, and even the placement of the figures around the table call to mind paintings by [Nicholas] Tournier, for example, and La Tour may have known prints of the subject. By the fourth decade of the seventeenth century, Caravaggio’s *Cardsharps* brought forth its most ingenious prodigy in La Tour’s creation, even as its influence waned. 27

Although the content of the two paintings is very similar, their composition is strikingly different. Typical of Caravaggio’s style, *The Cardsharps* is lit by staged and theatrical lighting. Despite the criminality of the scene, the three men are rendered in an unusually idealized style; in particular, the two younger men have smooth, rosy skin rendered in detailed brushstrokes. The boys’ clothes also appear to be high-class, and the garments are rendered in exquisite color. The

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garments help to create a three-dimensional space. By contrast, La Tour’s *The Cheat with the Ace of Diamonds* is illuminated without a definite light source or cast shadows. Three of the figures are luminously pale, while the face of the cheat (left) is in dark shadow. Already we begin to see hints of La Tour’s later development, characterized by highly stylized figures. The face of the woman second from the right is almost mask-like in its inscrutability, invoking Mary’s highly stylized and smoothly modeled form in Bellange’s *The Lamentation of Christ* (fig. 5) and reflecting the stylistic influence of French Mannerism on La Tour.

In addition to stylistic and thematic influences from Utrecht to the north and Rome to the south, La Tour’s work shows his positionality as a Lorrainese painter. When La Tour was beginning his artistic career, Lorraine hosted a strong and distinctive tradition of Mannerism, a late Renaissance style characterized by courtliness, decoration, and elaborate, mannered figures. Many art historians propose that Jacques Bellange (1575-1616), as a Lorrainese Mannerist and Nancy’s preeminent painter of the generation before La Tour, was likely to have been La Tour’s teacher, or at least a strong inspiration. One striking point of comparison between Bellange and La Tour is the similarity between Bellange’s etching *The Hurdy-Gurdy Player* (fig. 6) and La Tour’s *A Hurdy-Gurdy Player* (fig. 7), demonstrating a clear link between La Tour and the established artistic tradition of Lorraine.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, the blind beggar playing the hurdy-gurdy on the street was a common trope in Dutch and French painting; as an instrument, the hurdy-gurdy became associated with lower class street entertainment. Bellange’s *The Hurdy-Gurdy Player*

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25 Conisbee, “An Introduction to the Life and Art of Georges de La Tour,” 60.
depicts the lone, standing figure of the aged hurdy-gurdy player, whose blank eyes indicate that he is blind. His simple clothing and patchy beard underscore his poverty. He balances the instrument on his extended and bent left knee and plays it with his withered left hand while turning the crank with his right. His mouth is open in song, and he is clearly missing teeth, contributing to the piteousness of the figure. The etching’s composition is distinctly Mannerist; the hurdy-gurdy player’s body has a twisting, sinuous appearance, like a figura serpentinata, with the shoulders and hips at different angles.

La Tour’s *A Hurdy-Gurdy Player* is similar in its subject and themes of destitution, but one notable difference is that it is a large oil-on-canvas painting, indicating that La Tour places a high level of importance on the subject. The hurdy-gurdy player’s eyes are closed, symbolizing his blindness more subtly than Bellange does. The man is seated and, as in Bellange’s etching, he balances the instrument on his lap, plays with his left hand, and turns the crank with his right. His mouth is also open as if in song, but the top row of his teeth is obscured. La Tour’s composition is more naturalistic than Bellange’s, with the man’s torso and hips both angled in the same direction. Bellange’s rendering and La Tour’s composition are similar in the subject’s attire, position, and dominant presence in the composition. However, La Tour’s tone is more compassionate; both inspire pity, but Bellange’s hurdy-gurdy player is intimidating and undesirable in appearance.

La Tour renders his subject with soft lighting and autumnal colors. One unique detail is La Tour’s inclusion of a life-sized fly on the hurdy-gurdy player, creating a trompe l’oeil effect: is the fly in the painting or on the surface of the canvas? This trompe-l’oeil demonstrates La Tour’s sense of humor integrated into his deft reinterpretation of the hurdy-gurdy player trope. To the viewer, the fly appears as a flaw on the surface of the canvas, mirroring the human
imperfections La Tour is keen to represent in his genre works. The trompe-l’oeil demonstrates La Tour’s sense of self-consciousness; while demonstrating his technical prowess as an artist, he appears keenly aware of his own role in the creative process. The suspension of disbelief ceases; noting the fly, the viewer ceases to view the painting as a window to a scene and encounters the hand of the artist. This evident sense of self-awareness portends the spiritual introspection manifested in La Tour’s later works.

La Tour’s genre works bring his unique sensibilities into the established genre subjects of Northern Baroque and French Mannerism: realistic scenes of beggars, peasants, and musicians. At the beginning of his career, La Tour was more influenced by other artists, such as Bellange and Honthorst, but he developed his own style more strongly beginning in the 1630s. However, even his early genre works demonstrate his emerging style of tenebrism and a delicate balance of realism, characteristic of Italian and Dutch Caravaggism, and idealization, characteristic of French Mannerism and Classicism. La Tour’s genre and religious works are not strictly divided between his early and late career, as demonstrated by his early Albi Cathedral Apostles, of which only a few originals survive but which show a Caravagesque realism unusual for religious subjects. However, his art undergoes a definite shift towards religious mysticism in his mature career. Even La Tour’s late genre works demonstrate the intensity, quietude, and introspection that characterizes his later religious paintings, indicating a dramatic tonal and stylistic shift from his early career. The late, nocturnal genre paintings, including *The Flea Catcher*, *Boy Blowing on a Charcoal*, and *A Girl Blowing on a Brazier* demonstrate mystical introspection and symbolically invoke the role of the artist as a spiritual intercessor. Influenced by Counter-Reformation theology and by French Christian writings, La Tour turned inward to

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34 Thuillier, *Georges de La Tour*, 282.
develop the intense, introspective style which characterizes his later paintings. This shift in La Tour’s artistic worldview coincides with a stronger Jesuit and Capuchin presence in his region. It is impossible to say with certainty whether La Tour changed his subject matter and style to remain a prestigious artist in the midst of religious and political turbulence, or whether his personal religious philosophy was shaped by the religious ideas to which he was exposed. It seems most likely that the reality was a combination of the two, with both socio-political factors and individual religious convictions shaping La Tour’s artistic viewpoint as a spiritual intercessor on behalf of his audience.

CHAPTER 2: Christian Mysticism in La Tour’s World

Georges de La Tour stands out among 17th century French painters for his choice of subject matter; in her 2018 study of La Tour, philosopher Dalia Judovitz emphasizes that (in his surviving body of work) La Tour only painted genre and religious scenes, while the conventional genres of his contemporaries also include portraiture, historical scenes, and landscape. From this evidence, it is apparent that La Tour had a particular interest in religious painting. Both his genre and religious scenes place a close focus on representing humanity, while using light to symbolize truth and holiness. His representations demonstrate a deep sense of spirituality which develops strongly over time as his style matures. In this chapter, I will explore La Tour’s religious milieu in order to understand the specific impacts of theology on his religious paintings. Given a lack of historical documentation of La Tour’s career, it is impossible to say definitively which authors and theologians to whom he may have been directly exposed. However, his home region of Lorraine, to the northeast of France and bordering the Protestant German states, was a stronghold of the Counter Reformation, and La Tour was clearly influenced by Counter Reform

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36 Judovitz, Georges de La Tour and the Enigma of the Visible, 1.
theology. Here, I will present regionally and theologically important thinkers in order to make
connections to La Tour’s religious paintings, centered on the themes of meditation and personal
spirituality.

In La Tour’s time, Lorraine was at a religious and cultural crossroads. At the beginning
of the 17th century, it was an independent duchy under the protection of the Duke of Lorraine,
and not yet annexed to its powerful neighbor to the west, the Kingdom of France. However, to
complicate matters for La Tour, his birth town of Vic-sur-Seille was religiously under the
protection of the French Bishop of Metz, starting in 1552: “mixed loyalties were a part of life in
Lorraine at the time [of La Tour’s birth], and the professional life of La Tour would prove to be
no exception.” 37 While the population of Lorraine was largely French-speaking and Catholic, it
was in geographic proximity to Protestant countries at a time of immense religious and political
strife between Catholic and Protestant lands:

“Indeed [Vic-sur-Seille] made for a lively and stimulating place, located at a minor
European crossroads of sorts, in Lorraine but between France, the German states of the
Holy Roman Empire, the Spanish Netherlands, and not far from Protestant German
states.” 38

The Counter Reformation was in full motion, as the Roman Catholic Church struggled to
maintain power in Europe. 39 The Counter Reformation included both political and cultural
wings; one important aspect of the cultural wing was the development of a theology that would
keep believers devout while countering Protestant accusations of decadence and immorality. The
Counter Reformation shaped and defined Baroque art in terms of its subject matter and modes of
expression. To understand La Tour’s paintings, it is important to examine the impact of Counter

Reformation theology on his work as well as the particular religious influences of his historical and geographical context.

From 1545 to 1563, the Church held the Council of Trent to respond to the Protestant Reformation and to develop the strategies to counter Protestantism which would come to be known as the Counter Reformation. In response to Protestants’ accusations of Catholic idolatrous image-worshipping and licentious art of religious figures, the Council of Trent established doctrines on the proper use of images which shaped and defined art production for the Baroque period:

Moreover, in the invocation of saints, the veneration of relics, and the sacred use of images, every superstition shall be removed, all filthy lucre be abolished; finally, all lasciviousness be avoided; in such wise that figures shall not be painted or adorned with a beauty exciting to lust; nor the celebration of the saints, and the visitation of relics be by any perverted into revellings and drunkenness; as if festivals are celebrated to the honour of the saints by luxury and wantonness.\(^{40}\)

Religious artworks were supported as a vessel for educating a largely-illiterate population, but only on the condition that they conveyed clear, visually-legible information.\(^{41}\) The Council of Trent was a defining moment for Baroque art. Piety and propagation of faith (*Propaganda Fide*) were defined as the proper realm of artworks. As an artist in a Catholic region during the 17th century, the Counter Reformation had a profound impact on La Tour’s work and his treatment of religious subjects.

Alphonse de Rambervilliers (1553-1633), a lieutenant-general of Vic-sur-Seille, was one of the most important figures in La Tour’s early life and career. Rambervilliers was a wealthy, cultured, and deeply religious man; his records show that he had a sizable art collection and was

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an artist himself. Thuillier theorizes that as one of Vic-sur-Seille’s premier citizens and a patron of the arts, Rambervilliers may well have been La Tour’s first patron or first painting master. Although documents about La Tour’s professional life are sparse, the two men have a documented personal relationship, as Rambervilliers was a witness for the bride’s side at La Tour’s marriage to the noblewoman Diane le Nerf (1592-1652).

One of Rambervillier’s significant surviving works is an illuminated manuscript of poetry completed in 1600, entitled *Les dévots élancemens du poète chrestien* (The Pious Learnings of the Christian Poet), which he illustrated himself. According to Thuilliers, the finely-detailed tempera paintings which illustrate the book “rank with the best of the period and reveal a true artistic sentiment.” Most of the illustrations are of a devout man - the figure of the Christian poet - kneeling in prayer and receiving the sacraments. The frontispiece (fig. 8) depicts a woman, seated on a rock and reading *Les dévots élancemens du poète chrestien*. This figure may be the Virgin Mary, as indicated by her red dress and blue hood. However, her attributes lead me to argue that she is Mary Magdalene: there is a pitcher at her left which strongly suggests Mary Magdalene’s emblematic unction jar. Rambervilliers depicts her in the act of praying the rosary with a set of beads. Under her feet, a man lies on the ground chained to the rock, his body twisted and contorted. This figure is likely emblematic of a sinner in torment, although Mary seems unconcerned by his presence. The figure’s position below Mary may symbolize death, entombment, and a connection to Christ in the tomb. To the sinner’s left are implements of self-flagellation, including a whip and a hair shirt, and to the right are bags of coins, which further leads me to conclude that the praying figure is Mary Magdalene, having discarded the

43 Thuillier, *Georges de La Tour*, 20.
45 Thuillier, *Georges de La Tour*, 22.
trappings of her secular life. The items on the ground appear to have been cast aside or risen above, as items of Vanitas, and the devout central figure is ready to be a devoted Christian.\(^{47}\)

Another of the manuscript’s painted illustrations (fig. 9), for a poem entitled “La consideration de la mort” (“Consideration on death”), shows the central figure of the Christian holding and contemplating a skull, which is a strong recurring theme in La Tour’s work.\(^{48}\) The Jesuits recommended contemplation of a skull as part of the ritual of prayer.\(^{49}\) La Tour uses the skull in his representations of Saint Mary Magdalene, Saint Jerome, and Saint Francis to symbolize enlightenment through meditation on death. Rambervillier’s paintings implement the visual strategies of the Counter Reformation, including narrative clarity, easily defined saintly attributes, and informative symbolism. His poetry emphasizes individual contemplation and meditation on sin, piety, and death. The figure of the Christian poet is guided in his journey by saints, angels, and Catholic priests, centralizing the Church as the proper vessel for penitence and salvation.\(^{50}\) Rambervilliers is also highly deferential to the King of France; Conisbee theorizes that the manuscript only survived because it was dedicated as a gift to Henri IV and kept in his collection.\(^{51}\) Les dévots élancemens du poète chrestien provides valuable insight into La Tour’s local religious milieu and the devout culture in which he was producing art. While Rambervilliers’s book predates the Jesuits’ installation in Lorraine by 25 years, the arrival of Jesuit theology in France and Lorraine blended with the existing tradition of mystical writing, as exemplified by Rambervilliers. The imagery of La Tour’s religious paintings reflect a personal spirituality influenced by French mysticism and Jesuit thought.

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\(^{47}\) Rambervilliers, Les dévots élancemens du poète chrestien (1600), 1.

\(^{48}\) Rambervilliers, Les dévots élancemens du poète chrestien (1600), 82.


\(^{50}\) Rambervilliers, Les dévots élancemens du poète chrestien (1600).

\(^{51}\) Conisbee, “An Introduction to the Life and Art of Georges de La Tour,” 16.
In approximately 1618, La Tour moved from Vic-sur-Seille to Lunéville, the hometown of his wife Diane le Nerf.\textsuperscript{52} He would spend the most productive years of his career in Lunéville, a larger town than Vic-sur-Seille, located about 15 miles to the south. Unlike Vic-sur-Seille, Lunéville was not under the bishopric of Metz; beginning in 1625, the dominant religious order in Lunéville was the Chanoines réguliers de la Congrégation de Nôtre-Sauveur (Canons regular of the Congregation of Our Savior).\textsuperscript{53} The Chanoines réguliers de la Congrégation de Nôtre-Sauveur, led by the ascetic theologian Pierre Fourier, were installed at the Abbey of Saint-Remi by Pope Urban VIII Barberini (reign 1623-44) to counter Protestantism in Lorraine.\textsuperscript{54} Pierre Fourier and the Chanoines réguliers de la Congrégation de Nôtre-Sauveur were guided by Jesuit thought; Jesuit-influenced Counter Reformation Catholicism was the dominant spiritual movement in Lunéville, as it was the leading order of the Catholic Counter-Reformation in Europe.\textsuperscript{55}

One of the Jesuit ideas which had a significant impact on La Tour was the concept of Christian meditation; the writings of the Jesuit Order’s founder and a leading Counter Reformation theologian, St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), elucidate meditation as one of the key developments in Christian thought during the Counter Reformation period. Within Jesuit thought, meditation would lead to action, in the form of militant evangelical activity and defense of the Church. Ignatius’s \textit{Spiritual Exercises} outline a practice “of meditating, contemplating, [and] praying vocally and mentally.”\textsuperscript{56} The exercises center personal reflection on the mysteries of Christianity, particularly Christ’s Passion. The widespread advocacy of a personalized

\textsuperscript{52} Furness. \textit{Georges de La Tour of Lorraine, 1593-1652}, 15.


\textsuperscript{54} Folliet, “Saint Pierre Fourier - Sa correspondance 1598-1640,” 164.

\textsuperscript{55} Congrégation de Notre-Dame Archives, Caption: \textit{Portrait of Pierre Fourier} (Montreal: Faith in Action, n. d.).

relationship with God and introspective prayer was a new idea in early modern Christianity. In order to legitimize the practice of meditative theology, Ignatius relates his ideas to those of early Christian scholar-saints, including St. Jerome (c. 342-347). In addition to prioritizing education, the Jesuits elevated scholar-saints as models of Catholic spirituality; as a result, meditative, hermetical saints became popular subjects in Baroque art. The development of introspective theology impacted both La Tour’s choice of subject matter and his style. Some of La Tour’s finest and most iconic religious paintings are of favored Baroque saints, particularly St. Jerome and Mary Magdalene. In addition, La Tour’s religious nocturnes have a personal, internal meditative stylistic quality which marks the influence of Ignatian meditation.

Under the religious authority of the Catholic Church, France hosted a lively tradition of Christian mystical writers and poets, whose ideas likely impacted La Tour’s spirituality and religious works. These key ideas include solitary reflection, meditation, and veneration of scholar-saints. According to historian Susan Haskins, artistic representations of Mary Magdalen soared in popularity under the Counter Reformation. During the Baroque period, writers and artists focused on her tears, her penitence, and her meditations. One such example from 17th century French literature is Élévations du cardinal de Bérulle sur sainte Madeleine [Elevations of Cardinal de Bérulle on Saint Mary Magdalen] by Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle (1575-1629).

Bérulle dwells on Mary Magdalen’s penitence:

Cette âme est tellement couverte de ses larmes, ce cœur tellement fondu dans sa dilection, que rien n'y paraît qu'amour…

[This soul is so covered by its tears, this heart so melted in its affection, that nothing appears there but love…]

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57 Ignatius of Loyola, “Spiritual Exercises,” 357.
61 My translation.
Bérulle focuses on Mary Magdalen’s weeping at the moment of her penitence, as she converts from her luxurious, sinful life as a courtesan to a humble and devout follower of Christ. The vivid image of Mary Magdalen’s penitence became a strong theme for Baroque painters as well, with exquisite versions by Caravaggio and La Tour.

A contemporary French writer who focuses on the tears of the Magdalen is César de Nostredame (1553-1629), an author, historian, and son of the famous Nostradamus. César de Nostredame wrote *Les Perles, ou les larmes de la saincte Magdeleine* [*The Pearls, or the tears of Saint Mary Magdalen*], a book of rhymed poetry on the subject of the Magdalen. Nostredame dwells closely and intimately on her penitence. In addition to symbolically referring to her tears as pearls throughout, he uses imagery of a flame to describe her passion:

> Pensons un peu de quelle viue flamme / et quel amour elle brûlait en l'âme / et quel désir agitait sa raison / de la chasser bientôt de la prison…  

My translation.

Nostredame symbolizes Mary Magdalen’s passion for Christ as a flame which leads her out of the prison of sin. The use of flame and burning imagery is significant when considered in relation to La Tour’s Magdalen series; La Tour frequently depicts the Magdalen lit by highly symbolic candlelight. It is impossible to say whether La Tour was directly influenced by Nostredame’s poem, but the thematic similarity to his Magdalene series is striking. The Northern Renaissance visual tradition uses bright, opaque light to symbolize divinity; La Tour draws on this tradition, transforming the symbol of light into a quiet and intense introspective theology.

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63 My translation.
No writings survive detailing La Tour’s personal religious views or spiritual practices, but his religious nocturnes display a deep and sensitive spirituality. By looking to the influential religious groups and figures in La Tour’s locale, the Counter Reform theology which created a Jesuit stronghold in Lorraine, and popular mystical Christian writers of La Tour’s time, it is possible to develop a picture of the spiritual influences at play in his work. While Caravaggio and others also implement Baroque spiritual themes, such as a clarity of subject matter and an elevation of scholar-saints, one of the most striking aspects of La Tour’s religious paintings is a meditative, introspective quality, concurrent with the introduction of meditation to French and Lorrainese Catholic practice.

CHAPTER 3: La Tour’s Saint Jerome and Saint Francis (1628-1645)

As a mature artist, La Tour moved away from genre scenes like *The Cheat with the Ace of Diamonds* and preferred to focus almost entirely upon religious subjects. Many of his most iconic paintings, including *The Penitent Magdalen*\(^6\), are dark, nocturnal indoor scenes, illuminated by candlelight. La Tour’s unparalleled skill at depicting the mystical effect of candlelight is arguably his greatest legacy as an artist. Furness finds La Tour’s artistic style to include a “specialised kind of lighting founded on the Tenebrist method that was developed by Caravaggio and carried on by his followers” and a “range of colours which, though not unrelated to those favoured by the Caravaggist school, is yet distinctively his own… derived… from the colours of flame.”\(^6\) La Tour is particularly known for his iconic later painting style (from the 1640s to his death in 1652), which is highly original and striking. The figures are highly idealized, with smooth, pale features. The result bears a strong resemblance to medieval art in

\(^6\) Georges de La Tour, *The Penitent Magdalen*, c. 1640, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art.  
\(^6\) Furness, *Georges de La Tour*, 34.
some ways, harkening back to this highly religious time in France’s history. While medieval Christian art tends to elevate its figures to nobility, La Tour emphasizes instead the ascetic and the hermetic, reflecting the values of Counter Reformation France.

The use of perspective and illusory lighting marks La Tour’s work as distinctly Baroque. While the Caravaggistic influence is still clearly present, La Tour’s later works see him take *tenebroso* in a new direction and include more of his own unique vision. It is unclear whence came La Tour’s fascination with portraying candlelight in painting; it is something rarely seen in Caravaggio and more frequently in the Northern Renaissance and Baroque.\(^67\) Furness theorizes that it may have originated with the Caravaggisti:

> It was probably Honthorst… who established the vogue for night-scenes by candle-light, alien to the style of Caravaggio, but popular with the more homely Netherlanders, and preferred and treated with dignity and distinguished beauty by Georges de la Tour.\(^68\)

La Tour’s use of flame is highly spiritual, not only naturalistic. The dim yet fervent lighting gives a sense of austerity but also of warmth, in contrast to Honthort’s use of candlelight in *The Mocking of Christ*,\(^69\) which illuminates a highly active - and not introspective - scene. Although La Tour diverted from Caravaggio in his use of lighting, his spiritual works have thematic similarities with Caravaggio. The sense of tenebrism and gravity remains, but La Tour’s paintings are more meditative and mysterious, drawing on the mystical Christian themes of truth attained through inner reflection. La Tour’s artistic sensibilities reflect the influence of Jesuit meditation theology. The symbolism of the flame draws on the contemporary literary tradition of Nostredame and Bérulle. As a result, La Tour and the Utrecht School gleaned inspiration from opposing aspects of Caravaggio’s work. While the Caravaggists tend to pick up on Caravaggio’s

\(^{67}\) James Snyder, *Northern Renaissance Art: Painting, sculpture, the graphic arts from 1350 to 1575*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2005).

\(^{68}\) Furness, *Georges de La Tour of Lorraine*, 18.

\(^{69}\) Honthorst, *The Mocking of Christ*, c. 1617, oil on canvas, LACMA, Los Angeles.
light and dark tenebrism and realistic subject matter, La Tour encapsulates the spirituality and
tenderness of certain of Caravaggio’s works, particularly his later religious paintings, such as the
nocturnal *Seven Works of Mercy*.70

During the Counter Reformation period, representations of scholar-saints rose in
popularity, due to rising literacy rates and a renewed interest in early Church Fathers, also known
as patristic theology. Counter Reformation theology sought to cement the legitimacy of the
Catholic Church by rediscovering and emphasizing the piety of hermit saints, particularly St.
Jerome:

Saint Jerome was a more typical example of those saints whose stock rose during the
Catholic reform. This fourth-century saint was one of the so-called Fathers or Doctors of
the early Christian church… whose historical importance lay in their formation of the
fundamental doctrines and practices of the Latin church in its early centuries. The
Catholic reformers were eager to reassert the precedence and the time-honored traditions
of their faith, so attention was focused on these formative figures, with Jerome ranked as
the most important one by the Council of Trent.71

In addition to his definitive translation of the Bible into Latin, St. Jerome is most known for his
hermetic sojourn in the wilderness to renounce earthly pleasures and gain meditative communion
with God. Historian Eugene Rice characterizes Jerome’s spirituality as a mortification of the
flesh: “By reducing the body to the insensibility of a stone, the hermit becomes literally dead to
the world. Then his soul, free at last, sometimes sees the angelic hosts and enjoys, in rare
moments of contemplation, an ecstasy akin to the mystic’s vision.”72 While Renaissance
representations of Jerome emphasize his status as a humanist scholar in his study, Baroque artists
and writers favor his asceticism and mysticism. St. Jerome’s Baroque iconography typically
includes red robes, a book or parchment to emblematize his Biblical scholarship, a lion by his
side as a guardian, and a *memento mori* skull. Jerome’s historically recorded sojourn in a desert

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71 Conisbee, “An Introduction to the Life and Art of Georges de La Tour,” 78.
cave provided rich ground for the imaginations of Renaissance and Baroque artists alike; while “Jerome probably did live in a natural cave,”73 the hermit’s cave in early modern art carries a rich symbolism of penitence, isolation, communion with nature, and divine inspiration. Among his paintings of saints, La Tour demonstrated a strong interest in St. Jerome, including two surviving full-length paintings.74 La Tour’s specific interest in St. Jerome as a religious subject dovetails with his portrayals of St. Mary Magdalen, indicating strong thematic and iconographic parallels between the two hermetic saints.

La Tour’s two full-length renditions of St. Jerome are nearly identical copies, with a few key alterations. The earlier version, known as the Grenoble Saint Jerome75 (fig. 10), and the later version, known as the Stockholm Saint Jerome76 (fig. 11), both depict the elderly St. Jerome kneeling in contemplation, seminude and flagellating himself with a bloodstained rope to mortify his flesh. A large, open book, displayed to the viewer, is supported by a skull in the lower right corner, indicating Jerome’s translated Bible supported by the concept of mortality. Jerome holds a simple wooden cross as he flagellates himself, contemplating the sufferings of Christ and demonstrating a direct identification with them. While many artists represent Jerome with his stigmata to further underscore his identification with Christ, La Tour eschews this miraculous gesture, instead using the simple wooden cross, bringing the viewer to a closer sense of personal identification with the saint. La Tour unflinchingly portrays Jerome’s advanced age and physical imperfections. Jerome’s expression shows an internally-oriented, reflective mode of prayer.

According to Conisbee, the Grenoble Saint Jerome was likely commissioned for a religious house, while the Stockholm Saint Jerome was included in Cardinal Richelieu’s

73 Rice, Saint Jerome in the Renaissance, 10.
75 Georges de la Tour, Saint Jerome, c. 1628-1630, oil on canvas, Musée de Grenoble, Grenoble.
76 Georges de la Tour, Saint Jerome, c. 1630-1632, oil on canvas, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm.
inventory and may have been commissioned specifically for him. The years of 1624 to 1634 were particularly violent and politically turbulent for Lorraine, as the house of Duke Henri II crumbled in 1624 and King Louis XIII of France took possession of Nancy in 1633, cementing full French control of the region following years of political intrigue and military siege. While Pierre Fourier remained loyal to the House of Lorraine and went into exile, La Tour followed Alphonse de Rambervillier’s example, swearing allegiance to France in 1634 and seeking French patronage: “There is no question that La Tour sought favor where he could find it, nor that he would continue to court French interest in the troubled years to come.” The Stockholm Saint Jerome, while very similar to the Grenoble Saint Jerome, includes a few key details likely designed to appeal to Richelieu specifically as a cardinal. The painting also appeals to French courtly sensibilities, modifying the bare rusticism of the Grenoble Saint Jerome. The increased stylistism of La Tour’s later works may be linked to his pragmatic need to align himself with the Classical sensibilities of Parisian painting.

The most noticeable difference between the two paintings is that in addition to the red robe draped over Jerome’s arm in both paintings, the Stockholm Saint Jerome includes a large red cardinal’s hat at left. The cardinal’s hat is likely included as a reference to Cardinal Richelieu, while acknowledging Jerome’s status as the first cardinal of the Catholic Church as well as a Church Father. The Stockholm version is rendered in more elaborated brushwork than the earlier one, which is particularly evident in a higher level of detail around the face, shifting the saint’s facial expression minutely from sorrowful penitence to reflective stoicism. The drapery of the red cardinal’s robe is three-dimensional, smooth, and regal, elevating Jerome to

the ennobled status of a Church Father and appealing to the French court. By contrast, the robe
of the Grenoble St. Jerome is visibly frayed at the edges, reflecting the humble, rustic spirituality
of Jerome as a hermit saint. While both paintings include rocks as an allusion to Jerome’s cave
iconography, the Stockholm version has fewer rocks and includes architectural details in the
background, placing Jerome in a setting that is ambiguously rustic and indoor at the same time.

The Grenoble version has more irregular rocks painted with quick, loose brushstrokes
and scattered around the floor, suggesting that this Jerome is situated in the wilderness. The
rocks may be a reference to Jerome’s Renaissance iconography, where he often flagellates
himself with a stone instead of the rope La Tour represents. In both versions, La Tour makes
use of highly theatrical lighting, with the background of the painting fading into darkness. In the
Grenoble painting, St. Jerome has a thin, silvery halo, which fades subtly into the background at
the edges; the halo could be read as an illusion of the light, signifying his holiness through sacred
illumination. According to Conisbee, this painting is the only instance of La Tour painting a
halo, indicating a high level of reverence for St. Jerome. Rather than representing fantastical
symbols of holiness such as nimbuses and winged angels, La Tour remains in the realist school
(exceptioning Jerome’s halo), even when he shifts from secular to religious subjects. His works
center the human body, portrayed realistically and intimately. La Tour uses light to symbolize
holiness, a practice which he hones further in the early religious nocturnes of the 1630s.

La Tour’s two Saint Jerome paintings maintain a strong realism inspired by Caravaggio’s
tenebrism. Caravaggio’s St. Jerome Writing (fig. 12) is a quintessential representation of the
scholarly saint, combining his role as a scholar with the evocative, sacred setting of the cave. St.
Jerome is portrayed as an elderly man with a long beard and a bald head. Here, the top of his

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82 Conisbee, “An Introduction,” 83.
83 Caravaggio, St. Jerome Writing, 1605-06, oil on canvas, Galleria Borghese, Rome.
head is very prominent and reflective. Caravaggio draws attention to it in order to highlight Jerome’s cerebral nature. Jerome’s head mirrors the skull on the desk next to him; perhaps he is contemplating his own morality. Interestingly, he is lit dramatically from behind, a highly theatrical gesture that has no explanation as a natural light source. The work was commissioned by Cardinal Scipione Borghese, the Cardinal Chancellor of the Church under his uncle, Pope Paul V Borghese, who became one of Caravaggio’s most prominent patrons by commissioning works for the Villa Borghese, now the Galleria Borghese in Rome. Cardinal Borghese’s patronage of Caravaggio parallels Cardinal Richelieu’s patronage of La Tour, demonstrating the two cardinals’ interest in Saint Jerome as the traditional first cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church. Caravaggio and La Tour both received favorable patronage from high-ranking members of the Church, contributing to the discourse of Counter Reformation art.

In later years, La Tour would return to the St. Jerome subject in a more idealized style in the seated *St. Jerome Reading* (fig. 13). La Tour’s *St. Jerome Reading* is an unusual iconographic depiction of St. Jerome for a few reasons. Firstly, although he is bald with a long beard, this St. Jerome is unusually young and vigorous, with smooth skin and a dark brown beard. He is idealized in a similar way to La Tour’s *Magdalen*. Perhaps La Tour is suggesting a link between the intellectual and the earthly. There is no skull present in the painting, like we see in Caravaggio’s 1605 rendition, and La Tour’s full-length version of circa 1628 to 1632, although it is typically part of St. Jerome’s distinctive iconography. In this nocturnal scene, Jerome is engaged in reading, with a candle in his right hand. He is reading a letter, referencing his theologically significant correspondence with many of his followers. The candle, placed very close to the parchment, illuminates Jerome, casts shadows, and renders the book he is reading

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85 Georges de la Tour, *St. Jerome Reading*, c. 1648-50, oil on canvas, Musée historique Lorrain, Nancy.
translucent to the viewer, in a stunning display of La Tour’s technical skill. The illumination of the candle symbolizes the light of divine inspiration and the power of the written Bible as a source of spiritual enlightenment. La Tour conceptually focuses holiness in the candle flame, a small point of light which illuminates the page and Jerome’s face in a soft glow. The parchment is translucently lit from behind, becoming lantern-like; the written word seems to glow, diffusing holiness and making truth visible. Perhaps St. Jerome’s halo was an early experiment in 1630 into outwardly manifested expressions of spirituality, which La Tour moved away from in the later Saint Jerome Writing, turning spirituality inward.

Saint Francis (1181-1226) is another meditative saint who enjoyed increased popularity during the Counter Reformation. During the 12th Century, Francis of Assisi, who travelled between Italy and France, devoted himself to a monastic life of poverty, and founded the Franciscan Order. In 1223, at a remote hermitage in Tuscany, St. Francis had an angelic vision and received the stigmata after meditating on Christ’s Passion. This vision, called the Ecstasy of Saint Francis, became a popular artistic subject during the Baroque period due to its emphasis on emotional passion and empathy with Christ’s suffering:

The Ecstasy of Saint Francis is another subject that was popular in the period of the Catholic reform and was painted by many artists in the seventeenth century. Through the intensity of his meditations on the mortality of the flesh and the sufferings of Christ, Francis swooned in a fit of ecstasy, which he likened to divine music.”

In 1595, Caravaggio painted Saint Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy, depicting the saint collapsing in the garden, supported by an angel. Georges de La Tour, too, completed a painting of the Ecstasy of St. Francis, which only survives in copies. Many scholars, including Conisbee,

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88 Caravaggio, Saint Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy, c. 1595, oil on canvas, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford.
Pierre Landry, and Vitale Block, accept the larger Le Mans version\(^\text{89}\) (fig. 14) as an original by La Tour.\(^\text{90}\) However, Thuillier convincingly argues that it is likely a copy, albeit a very large and finely executed one, likely by a close follower of La Tour.\(^\text{91}\) The lamp at center is very opaque, differing from La Tour’s trademark execution of candlelight; the opaque lamp in the Le Mans version looks very different from the diffuse glow in the smaller Hartford copy,\(^\text{92}\) indicating that both may be copies of the same lost original. Additionally, the complex expression of spiritual ecstasy on the saint’s face lacks La Tour’s delicacy in both copies. Although the original may be lost, we can get a sense of La Tour’s original, particularly from the Le Mans copy. The robes of St. Francis and his companion Brother Leo indicate that they are Capuchins, and further that the original painting may have been intended for the Capuchin monastery established in Lunéville in 1632. La Tour likely admired the Capuchins, as he left the Lunéville monastery a plot of land in his will.\(^\text{93}\) The Capuchins are a reformed, mendicant order of the Franciscans who emphasize simplicity and poverty; the order was highly influential in the Counter Reform, working in tandem with the Jesuits with a focus on appealing to the common people.\(^\text{94}\)

While Caravaggio portrays St. Francis with an angel, La Tour omits the angel from the scene, focusing on the relationship between Francis and his follower and companion, Brother Leo. Brother Leo faces St. Francis in profile, praying while contemplating the Bible and the candle; La Tour’s Brother Leo appears in a pose remarkably similar to his Magdalene series. Incidentally, Leo’s face is the part of the canvas in the Le Mans copy that looks most convincingly like an original La Tour, bearing a strong facial similarity to La Tour’s elderly St. Jerome, identifying him with Jerome’s hermetic and ascetic tradition. Leo appears unaware of

\(^{89}\) After Georges de La Tour, *The Ecstasy of Saint Francis*, c. 1640-1645, oil on canvas, Musée de Tessé, Le Mans.

\(^{90}\) Conisbee, “An Introduction,” 114, 146.

\(^{91}\) Thuillier, *Georges de La Tour*, 169-170.

\(^{92}\) After Georges de La Tour, *Saint Francis in Ecstasy*, after 1645, oil on canvas, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford.

\(^{93}\) Conisbee, “An Introduction to the Life and Art of Georges de La Tour,” 114.

Francis’s mystical vision, taking place right next to him, but he is oriented towards Francis as he is oriented towards the candle, reflecting an internal sense of spiritual truth manifested by the artist. St. Francis becomes a luminary through which Brother Leo and the painting’s viewer both enter contemplation of St. Francis’s mysticism and of Christ’s Passion.

Baroque representations of the Ecstasy of St. Francis often focus on the active moment of revelation and include an angelic figure, for instance, those by Caravaggio, Carlo Saraceni, and Jean Le Clerc. By contrast, La Tour’s rendition focuses on the introspective process of meditation. The candlelight nocturnal scene is unusually literal, with no miraculous elements or divine imagery, with “no angel, no stigmata, no halo above Saint Francis.” La Tour brings an arresting sense of humanity to the saint, making the potentially lofty subject matter feel immediate and present. La Tour’s St. Francis holds a memento mori skull, similar to Caravaggio’s Saint Francis in Meditation; spiritual enlightenment is perpetually paired with contemplation of death. La Tour’s religious nocturnes demonstrate a unique interplay between realism and spirituality. In some ways, La Tour is more realistic than Caravaggio, since Caravaggio frequently paints angels and La Tour refuses to include any emblems of divinity in his work (save the one experiment with St. Jerome’s halo). Given the overwhelming prevalence of outwardly divine signifiers in both religious and mythological paintings of the Baroque, their marked absence in La Tour’s work begins to feel like a deliberate and careful omission. However, in other ways, La Tour spares his subjects from the harsh detail of strict realism; in his later religious works, the human figures become more smoothed and idealized. In representing the sacred, La Tour actually takes the opposite approach to Caravaggio; Caravaggio brings in...

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95 Carlo Saraceni, *Saint Francis in Ecstasy*, c. 1615-1620, oil on canvas, Alte Pinakothek, Munich.
96 Jean Le Clerc, *Saint Francis in Ecstasy*, c. 1625-1633, oil on canvas, Parish Church of Bouxières-aux-Dames, Lorraine.
98 Caravaggio, *Saint Francis in Meditation*, c. 1606, oil on canvas, Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Antica, Rome.
signifiers of the divine to elevate his religious scenes while humanizing the saints through a sometimes gritty and earthy naturalism. La Tour omits angels and halos to focus on representing the human form, often creating works which feel highly specific to his historical moment and location - the ordinary people he encountered in daily life. He brings in spirituality by idealizing the human form and by crafting an exquisitely lovely effect of light, symbolizing the illuminating potential of spirituality. La Tour evokes his particular mysticism most clearly through religious nocturnes.

CHAPTER 4: La Tour’s Mary Magdalene Series (1635-1652)

La Tour strengthens and intensifies his works’ unique interplay between realism and spirituality in his iconic Saint Mary Magdalene series. La Tour began his Magdalene paintings in the 1630s;99 The series includes five representations, one of which only survives through a copy. Like Jerome, Mary Magdalene gained popularity during the Counter-Reformation as her image in Christian culture shifted to emphasize her penitence. Mary Magdalene appears briefly in the Bible as a follower of Christ; she repented of her vain, secular life, apocryphally as a prostitute, and entered poverty and chastity as a devout Christian.100 Later, like Jerome, she became a hermit saint, praying in a sacred cave in southern France; her immigration to France creates a geographical connection with La Tour. In 1539, the Capuchin Bernardino Ochino (1486-1564) delivered a sermon praising and emphasizing the penitence of the Magdalene.101 Her weeping and penance became a popular artistic subject: “Not only did the sacrament of penitence receive special attention as one of the most important steps to salvation, as we have noted in connection with La Tour’s images of the penitent Saint Jerome, but the Magdalene’s story had an especially

99 Thuillier, Georges de La Tour, pp. 152.
100 Haskins, Mary Magdalen, 1-2.
101 Haskins, Mary Magdalen, 271.
popular and human appeal.”

In repeatedly representing the Magdalene, La Tour crystallizes his nocturne style and emphasizes themes of introspective meditation and contemplation of death. La Tour’s use of the skull as an attribute of St. Mary Magdalene recalls Rambervilliers’s “La Consideration de la morte,” bringing in the motif of the skull as an aide to meditation and underscoring the significance of meditating on death to leave vanity behind and attain mystical union with God.

La Tour’s earliest known Magdalene only survives through a copy in a private collection: *The Repentant Magdalen with the Crucifix* (fig. 15). Mary’s right hand rests on a skull, while her left hand holds a crucifix. The position of the crucifix in her hand bears a strong resemblance to the wooden cross St. Jerome holds in La Tour’s *Saint Jerome* paintings, strengthening the thematic similarities between the two saints as meditative thinkers. Due to this parallel, Thuillier characterizes the Crucifix Magdalene as “the most rhetorical of all the versions [that La Tour completed].” Of La Tour’s Magdalene series, this version most clearly draws a connection between the later meditative life of the saint and her biblical closeness with Christ during the Crucifixion, weeping at the base of the Cross. By reflecting on Christ’s Passion and on her own mortality, Mary reaches a redemptive state of penitence. Unfortunately, the available photograph of the copy does not show whether it is a nocturne or whether there is a candle as the visible, defined light source. If not, then this early Magdalene is the only one in the series which is lit theatrically from outside and not by a visible, defined light source (typically a candle), demonstrating an early experimentation by La Tour. However, it is also entirely possible that the light source was cropped out, either by the copy on canvas or by the available photograph.

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102 Conisbee, “An Introduction to the Life and Art of Georges de La Tour,” 104.
103 Rambervilliers, *Les dévots élançemens du poète chrestien* (1600), 82.
104 After Georges de La Tour, *The Repentant Magdalene with the Crucifix*, after 1935, oil on canvas, private collection, France.
The Repentant Magdalene with a Document\textsuperscript{106} (fig. 16) is estimated to be the next painting in the series chronologically. Mary leans over a table, cradling a skull in her hands. Unusually for La Tour, this Magdalene is bare-chested, although her nudity is notably not sexualized. She is portrayed in profile and illuminated by a candle in front of her. The candle appears from behind the parchment page of a text, the Bible, illuminating it as in Saint Jerome Reading; the flame illusorily appears to be emanating from the page itself, positing sacred texts as an important part of spiritual enlightenment. Her gaze is fixed ambiguously on either the skull or the flame or the page, uniting three elements as part of the journey to repentance: contemplation of death, biblical passage, and meditative intensity as evoked by the flame. Light activates the scene; Mary herself has an inner glow, rendering spiritual realities visible. The motif of the skull as a memento mori is one of the Magdalene’s key attributes: “As examples to the faithful, Counter-Reformation saints such as Francis, Jerome and Mary Magdalen were shown contemplating death: George de la Tour’s paintings of Mary Magdalen are among the best-known images of the theme.”\textsuperscript{107} While the Magdalene with a Document shows the most direct engagement with the skull - she is holding it with both hands - Haskins selected La Tour’s The Magdalene at the Mirror\textsuperscript{108} (fig. 17) to illustrate the memento mori in Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor, possibly because it is the most emphatic of La Tour’s representations.

The Magdalene at the Mirror is the first work in the series to exhibit a pose that La Tour would frequently return to in his Magdalene representations: one hand is splayed over a skull, while the other cradles her cheek as she leans forward. As in Magdalene with a Document, the candle itself is not visible, but the flame is, symbolizing an idealized spiritual reality. The light radiates from behind the skull, putting it in stark relief and invoking an immaterial reality. The

\textsuperscript{106} Georges de La Tour, The Repentant Magdalene with a Document, c. 1635, oil on canvas, private collection.
\textsuperscript{107} Haskins, Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor, 265.
\textsuperscript{108} Georges de La Tour, The Magdalene at the Mirror, c. 1635, National Gallery, Washington DC.
titular mirror sits behind the skull, which rests on a tome. The mirror shows the viewer a new and more illuminated anterior angle of the skull, rendered in a higher level of detail than the skull in profile. When positioned with Mary, the mirror often symbolizes the earthly vanity which she must cast aside in order to follow Christ. However, La Tour may be giving a more nuanced interpretation of the mirror as a symbol of spiritual clarity and divine truth. As an artist, La Tour visually manifests the Loyolan practice “of meditating, contemplating, [and] praying vocally and mentally.”

Through the interplay of light and mirror, he creates a sensibility of holiness for the viewer. Rambervilliers, Béruelle, and Nostredame all create textual images of Mary Magdalene as a spiritual luminary. La Tour visually elaborates contemporary writers’ imagery of the saint as a key figure in meditation theology by creating representations of sacred light embodied in the figure of the Magdalene.

Chronologically the fifth in the series, La Tour’s *The Penitent Magdalene*, also known as the *Magdalene with Two Flames*, demonstrates similar use of space to Caravaggio’s *Penitent Magdalene* (fig. 18), bringing the viewer into the space and creating a close interaction with the scene. Caravaggio’s interpretation brings a humility and empathy to the saint. Both Magdalenes are seated with folded hands, in an attitude of repentant contemplation and prayer, and both paintings feature cast-aside finery in the foreground to represent Mary Magdalene’s rejection of worldly goods. However, Caravaggio visibly demonstrates her penitence and humility through his stylistic realism, while La Tour presents a more physically idealized figure. Caravaggio’s Magdalene has her eyes downcast in a humble attitude. Sorrow is clearly visible in her face, humanizing her in a realistic and personal way. Her garment pools around her body,

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folding in an elaborate and typically Baroque fashion. Her hair is reddish, loose and unkempt, prefiguring the washing of Christ’s feet.

La Tour’s *The Penitent Magdalene* has her face tilted away from the viewer. All the viewer can see is her smooth, pale, flawless face and the profiled outline of her features; this *profil perdu* indicates inward reflection. Her hair is a smooth, dark curtain, with a texture like silk or polished wood. Her garment is classically influenced and stands out in stunning white and red, made curiously translucent by the candlelight. The Magdalene holds an eerily smooth skull in her lap. Coupled with her red garment, it bears a resemblance to St. Jerome’s iconography, enhancing the intellectual dimension of the Magdalene. La Tour’s Magdalene is ethereal and otherworldly. While Caravaggio introduces us to a human and sympathetic sinner, La Tour shows us a woman spiritually transcending while still maintaining his focus on the humanity of the saint. Caravaggio uses his theatrical exterior lighting, while La Tour uses the image of the candle to suggest a heavenly light within. The viewer is invited into the circle of light thrown by the candle, while the candle itself is perfectly reflected in the ornate mirror, symbolizing a perfectly realized spirituality.

By choosing to represent the Magdalene in a pensive attitude and with the *memento mori*, La Tour not only elevates Mary to an unusually intellectual level, but also creates a tie between transient beauty and death. Caravaggio’s *David with the Head of Goliath* and the juxtaposition of the beautiful David with the grotesque Goliath. Both Caravaggio and La Tour explore a mystical connection between life and death, and raise questions about the meaning of beauty. By fully exploring the ugly and naturalistic in their work, the two artists were able to arrive at a new interpretation of spiritual beauty.
The fourth Magdalene in the series exists in two nearly identical versions, called *The Repentant Magdalene*\(^\text{112}\) (fig. 20) and *The Magdalene with the Smoking Flame*\(^\text{113}\) (fig. 21) respectively. Both paintings invoke a similar pose to *The Magdalene at the Mirror*, but here facing to the right instead of to the left, together crafting a recto and verso parallelism which reads textually. *The Repentant Magdalene* and *The Magdalene with the Smoking Flame* become literal mirror images of *The Magdalene at the Mirror*, invoking the iconography of the mirror as a window to divine truth. This is the first instance in the series where the light source is not only clearly defined, but fully visible: an oil lamp, possibly referencing Mary’s attribute of the unction jar. Mary’s gaze seems to be on the open flame, but it may be resting on the implements immediately behind it: a wooden cross and a rope whip which are astonishingly similar to the ones in La Tour’s *Saint Jerome*, indicating the Passion of Christ. Mary Magdalene’s face is visible in a soft, angled profile, but her rapt expression is apparent as she engages in meditation. The two nocturnes are rendered with an exquisite glowing quality as the light fades into darkness, invoking the feminine imagery of the moon. The luminosity of the Mary Magdalene nocturnes recalls lunar iconography, creating potential links with the Virgin Mary and with Diana, the Roman moon goddess. This imagery finds unexpected connections to La Tour’s personal life, as he lived most of his life in Lunéville [derived from “moon village”] and his wife’s name was Diane [the French form of Diana]. The intensity of the flame recalls César de Nostredame’s metaphor of Mary’s passion as a “flamme;”\(^\text{114}\) her emotional connection to Christ becomes a light source which illuminates the scene. By centering and elevating the flame as the sole light source of the image, La Tour transforms the act of painting itself into a mystical and

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\(^{112}\) Georges de La Tour, *The Repentant Magdalene*, c. 1640, oil on canvas, Louvre, Paris.

\(^{113}\) Georges de La Tour, *The Magdalene with the Smoking Flame*, c. 1636-1638, oil on canvas, LACMA, Los Angeles.

\(^{114}\) Nostredame, *Les Perles*, 35.
meditative practice, acting as spiritual intercessor for the viewer.\textsuperscript{115} The Repentant Magdalene in particular evokes the symbolic power of tenebrism; the darkness at the edges of the frame recalls mystery and death, hovering in the crevices of the skull, while the lamplight brings vitality and ephemerality - a living spark which suffuses the Magdalene’s form.

CONCLUSION

La Tour died in 1652, within a week of his wife; both died of a mysterious epidemic recorded as “pleurisy,” or difficulty of the lungs.\textsuperscript{116} This end seems particularly poignant in today’s circumstances. La Tour was a forgotten artist until his work enjoyed a renewed interest at the “Exposition des Peintres de la Réalité en France au XVII\textsuperscript{me} siècle” in 1934-5.\textsuperscript{117} It is unclear why his work fell out of fashion; although he was relatively provincial and spent most of his active years in Lunéville, he was successful in his time and enjoyed the patronage of the French King Louis XIII, among others.\textsuperscript{118} Perhaps La Tour’s realism and solemnity failed to find favor during the rise of the elaborate and whimsical late French Rococo. Today, he is rightfully recognized for “a monumentality which has no parallel among the other followers of Caravaggio, an impressive simplicity which converts the formula of naturalism into something classical.”\textsuperscript{119}

While all of La Tour’s works, both gene and religious, foreground a very human and intimate sense of the spiritual, the recurring themes of light, darkness, death, and meditation reach their peak in his iconic Magdalene series. By focusing on the human form, La Tour invokes the complex distinction between divinity, or godliness, and holiness, or dedication to God. His religious figures can be characterized as holy, but not divine, creating a sense of

\textsuperscript{115} Judowitz, Georges de La Tou, 49.
\textsuperscript{116} Thuillier, Georges de La Tour, 277.
\textsuperscript{117} Furness, Georges de La Tour, 1.
\textsuperscript{118} Furness, Georges de La Tour, 1.
\textsuperscript{119} Anthony Blunt, Art and Architecture in France, 154.
personal holiness within everyday life. Drawing on Christian mysticism, La Tour created a
wonderfully immediate series of paintings which remain poignant and evocative.
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