



SENSING THE IMAGE: GENDER, PIETY AND IMAGES IN LATE MEDIEVAL TUSCANY

Catherine Lawless

Abstract

The Florentine Dominican preacher Fra Giovanni Dominici (1355–1419) warned his female reader of the dangers to which the senses, and sight in particular, exposed the soul, reminding her of how Eve was led to sin by looking at the apple, Samson by looking at Delilah, and David in looking at Bathsheba. The Franciscan preacher Fra Bernardino da Siena (1380–1444) warned against what was evidently a common practice, that of running to kiss the altar, or the sacred stone, chalice or paten, and reminded his listeners that they were to consider themselves unworthy of such privileges. The sense of touch was often instrumental in obtaining cures, as well as fulfilling ritual requirements. Yet, as the preachers show, the senses, whose site is the body, can be agents of temptation. This essay explores a range of ways in which holy images were ‘sensed’ by women in renaissance Tuscany. My concern, in particular, is with the relationship between the sense of touch and images, especially small panel paintings.

Keywords: devotional image, senses, medieval women, popular piety, preaching, saints

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Biographical note

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Finally, when you have stayed with her for some time, ask permission to leave, and receive first the blessing of the boy Jesus and of the mother and of Joseph, kneel before them, and take leave of them with tears and deep sympathy.

Johannes de Caulibus,
Meditationes Vitae Christi, p.76

The above quotation, taken from a 14th century Franciscan *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, which was written for a nun, shows a clear relationship between bodily performance (kneeling, crying), imagination and prayer. It formed part of a growing body of literature from the late middle ages that advised on how prayer should be conducted and how the devotee should imagine scenes of the life and Passion of Christ. This paper examines the ways in which holy images were 'sensed' by women in renaissance Tuscany. It pays particular attention to the relationship between the sense of touch and images, in particular those which could be held, embraced, kissed and even, in a fashion, become one with the devotee, as in the case of somatic piety. In order to shed light on the significance of these cases of affective and somatic piety for women in medieval Italy, I explore the collaborative roles of the senses in the exemplary devotional practice of holy female figures, and the place reserved to the artwork for – and by – pious women.

Medieval piety and the senses

Late medieval penitential piety was characterised by increased lay participation in religious observance, often within new forms of religious life within the home or in communities strongly influenced by mendicant orders. The mendicant orders were often the guides and advisers to an increased bodily identification with the suffering Christ, whose flesh was consumed in the Eucharist. Mendicant piety, itself influenced by Cistercian affectivity, emphasised an emotional involvement with the life of Christ and the Virgin, stressing the need to feel in one's own body the pains of Christ's Passion and the sorrows of the Virgin, and

to perform acts of penitence for the sins committed by oneself and by humankind. This penitential movement was attractive to women, providing spaces for salvation outside the traditional cloister and forms of life more sympathetic to urban and mercantile classes than the traditional earlier medieval model of warriors, workers and clergy. Fearful that such penitential movements could lead to, or shelter heresy, the church, and in particular the mendicant orders, sought to guide and direct such piety (Vauchez, 1993, p.337). Further, the emotional nature of women, understood and accepted as being more labile than men, was seen as being particularly receptive to this type of piety. Daniel Bornstein has shown how gender was important in the construction of late medieval female mysticism, in that women were believed to be more pliant in the receiving of impressions, like wax, due to their cooler and moister humours (Bornstein, 1998, p.176). Women, according to the Franciscan St Bonaventura (1221–74) were more sensitive than men, and thus more able to feel keenly the torture of the Passion:

You will see even more clearly how cruel was the death of Christ if you consider that whatever is more sensitive suffers more. In general, the body of a woman is more sensitive than that of a man; but never was there a body that felt pain as keenly as that of the Saviour, since his flesh was entirely virginal, conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin

(Easton, 2002, p.53)

The sources used for this discussion will, for the most part, come from the mendicant tradition and consist of the lives of holy women, usually written by mendicant confessors, or treatises and guides to prayer and pious living composed by mendicants for women. These sources can tell us about the bodily and sensual relationship between women and art objects, although they are usually frustratingly quiet on the pictorial details or qualities of those same objects, devoting considerably less space to art than to the highly coloured and sensual visions and dreams of the women concerned. The artworks were not aesthetic objects worthy of description, but tools in the practice of piety, aimed at helping the devout in their prayers.

References to the 'five senses' occur frequently in the vernacular literature upon which much of this study is based, as it was a commonly accepted category in the middle ages (Goody, 2002). The senses were often conceived as the five portals connecting the body to the soul and through which the exterior world was mediated. The Dominican archbishop of Florence,

Antoninus Pierozzi (1389–1459), in a work of spiritual advice entitled *Opera a ben vivere* and directed to Dianora Tornabuoni (1425–61), a wife and mother, warned that when one is at Mass, one must lock the ‘gates of the body’, that is, the senses, as it is through these that temptation enters (Antoninus, 1858, p.268).¹ In the binary of body and soul, the former is a carnal trap that imprisons the soul. The senses are agents of the body, thus part of the corrupt mortal flesh, yet the rewards for triumph over the flesh are presented in the language of the senses. As women were perceived as more fleshly than men, and thus particularly sensual, their bodies were believed to need firm regulation and direction (Solterer, 1994, p.129).

The ambiguity with which the body and the senses were viewed can be summarised by referring to the great evangelists of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. For example, Fra Giovanni Dominici (1355–1419), a Dominican, like Antoninus, whom he knew, warned his female reader, Bartolomea degli Obizzi, widow of the Florentine exile Antonio Alberti, of the dangers inherent in the senses, reminding her of how Eve was led to sin by looking at the apple, Samson by looking at Delilah, and David in looking at Bathsheba. The blind were blessed, because they were saved from sin entering through the portal of the eyes (Dominici, 1860, p.46). Women were to open their eyes to the beauties of God’s creation when out in the country, but in the city, where many sinners were, they were to keep their eyes lowered and fixed on the earth. Ears were to be used to hear divine words and doctrine and could be turned sympathetically towards others’ miseries. The melody of birdsong could, however, be enjoyed (p.47). Although Dominici believed that the nose did not sin as much as the other sensory organs, he warned that it should not be held high over the sick or leprous, and reminded his audience that Christ did not refuse the smell of Lazarus and instead reproved Martha for not wishing to subject him to the smell (pp.48–9).

The significance of images to devotion was, of course, much discussed by medieval theologians. Gregory the Great’s often-cited formulation of images as the literature of the laity was echoed in late medieval mendicant piety. St Bonaventura wrote that a picture is that which ‘instructs, arouses pious emotions and awakens memories’ (cited in Panofsky, 1953, p.141). Bonaventura’s Dominican counterpart, St. Thomas Aquinas (c.1225–74) developed the point, commenting that art was didactic in that it taught the person what to venerate, it helped the person to remember, and it

inspired devotion (Thomas Aquinas, 2005). Dominici himself prayed in front of an image of St Catherine of Siena (1347–80) to cure his stammering (Hood, 1993, p.22). The religious image was embedded in a network of devotional practices, beliefs, rituals and behaviours, and in some of which the image was an active participant, for instance, in miraculous activity where it moved, spoke, wept or bled. While such phenomena have been discussed fully elsewhere (Trexler, 1972, 1980; Freedberg, 1989), what has usually, and not unreasonably, been emphasised, is how religious art works were *seen*.² However, sight and touch had yet to be distinctly separated according to our modern formulation. They were not so separate in medieval devotion – images could impress themselves on the heart ‘like a seal impresses its image in wax’, for example (Kleinbub, 2013, p.110). Thus, the sharp distinction between the visual and the tactile is a modern one, and boundaries between sensory experiences (seeing/touching) were more fluid in medieval culture. Indeed, in devotional practice, the experience of an artwork was often part of a process in which the *appearance* of the work itself was of less importance than its use as a mediator between the inner and outer senses.

Women, like children, were expected to be moved more easily by images than by texts. Fra Girolamo Savonarola (1452–98) in a sermon in 1494 delivered in Florence noted that ‘Children and women respond like plants do, with their bodies, and through physical stimulation. Paintings in churches are their books, and we should provide for them better than the pagans did’ (Richardson, Woods and Franklin, 2007, p.213). Savonarola’s views on images fit well within the mendicant tradition of reaching out to women, children and the unlettered. The Franciscan preacher San Bernardino di Siena (1380–1444) wrote:

Note therefore that there are four kinds of letters, each better than the other. The first kind are gross letters for rude folk, as for example, pictures; the next, for men of middle sort, are middle letters, as for example, written letters; and these are better than the first. The third are vocal letters intended for those men who desire actively to busy themselves for charity’s sake, pleading and discoursing in order that they may be learned and may teach others, and these excel the first two. Fourthly and lastly come mental

¹ On Antoninus’ *Opera a ben vivere*, see Theresa Flanigan’s essay in this volume.

² Kathleen Biddick has pointed out, for example, that sense and touch were separated only by the ‘industrial mappings’ of the body in 19th century scientific and medical discourses; Biddick, 1993, p.389.

letters, ordained by God for those who desire to persevere always in contemplation and these are more perfect than the others and exceed them all.

(cited in Hope, 1990, p.560)

This view places emphasis on the role of the mental image, three steps higher than the visual image, and shows how the interior devotional landscape was the most highly valued in mendicant piety.

Lectio Divina, or divine reading, had for a long time held a place in monastic piety. Mysticism, or union with the divine, could be reached by meditation on scripture and its meanings within a literal and allegorical framework. The emphasis on the text expanded, concurrently with the rise of lay piety, to encompass a 'reading' of the image towards the same end: that of achieving unity with God (Jones, 2002, p.38). An example of how a pious woman could move from an image sensed with the eyes of the body to a devotion sensed with the eyes of the mind is found Antoninus' instructions to Dianora in *Opere ben vivere*, when he tells her how she should pray, whether in church or in her own room. He told her to kneel in front of a crucifix, and with 'the eyes of the mind' move from the crown of thorns, to the eyes filled with tears, blood and sweat, to the nose, filled with mucous and blood, and then to the mouth, and to say a certain amount of paternosters and ave marias. She was then to move on to contemplating his hands, and say more paternosters and ave marias, similarly his feet, and then his side, at which point she was to contemplate the pain of the Virgin Mary, predicted by Simeon. Dianora was urged to move over the body of Christ with the 'eyes of the mind', but in front of the physical presence of a crucifix (Antoninus, 1858, pp.169–170).

Performative piety

Anne L. Clark has pointed out how bodily deportment and behaviour, as prescribed in religious and secular literature, and enacted on a daily or frequent basis, shaped religious experience (Clark, 2007, pp.165–89). The Augustinian prioress Maddalena Albrizzi of Como (d.1465), after having made the sign of the Cross at dawn and struck herself three times in memory of the Trinity, would lean towards the image of the Virgin, thanking her for her maternal protection. She saluted otherwise the effigy of St Augustine, considering that it was his rule under which she lived. Later she prayed in front of the image of St Mary Magdalen on a panel ('in tabula expressam'), asking that she be favoured with penitence. Finally, she prayed to her guardian angel, St Michael, and St Gabriel (AS, Maii, vol.III, p.259). Such practices were not confined to Italy, of course,

and powerful models are provided by holy figures in other parts of Europe: Birgitta of Sweden (1302–73) aged twelve, naked in the cold, prayed in front of the Crucifixion, flagellating herself, while her companions slept (AS, Octobris, vol.IV, p.487). Another holy child, Margaret of Hungary (1242–70), when aged four in a Dominican convent, prostrated herself in front of a crucifixion in the form of a cross, and from then on, wherever she saw a cross, prostrated herself and adored it. Her biographer goes on to say that she skipped meals in order to pray in front of the image of the Crucified Christ, which was in the chapter, and always prayed at the altar of the Holy Cross or in front of a depiction of it. Whenever she saw an image of the Virgin she knelt, and gave the Angelic Salutation (AS, Januarii, vol.I, p.516).

The biographer of St Catherine of Siena (d.1380) and ardent promoter of her cult, the Dominican Tommaso Caffarini (1350–1434), wrote of how a pious woman of Venice was converted into a life of piety. The account moves from the sense of hearing to that of seeing, and then from the sense of seeing to the bodily enactment of pious acts. After hearing Caffarini preach about St Catherine of Siena, Maria Sturion (c.1379–1399) saw in a painter's shop an image of that saint. Although the image was intended by the painter as a gift for Caffarini, Maria persuaded him to let her have it instead. After acquiring the painting, she began to wear a white tunic over a hair shirt, wishing 'to be dressed entirely in the complete habit of Saint Dominic for love of him, just like the blessed virgin Catherine'. She then had herself depicted in an icon, wearing that habit with some other Dominican saints, 'before the image of the crucified Jesus, holding her heart in her hand' offering it to him (Caffarini, 2005, pp.138–9). Later in the legend, Caffarini adds that 'she had herself depicted in an icon entirely clothed in that habit and thus, by contemplating herself in her cell, she herself satisfied her desire as best she could' (p.148). Another nun in the same convent, Suor Orsa, saw St Peter the Apostle in a vision, 'whose face I recognized easily not only from having seen him depicted in churches, but also from having embroidered it at times' (p.166).

The advice given by Dominici to his devotee Bartolomea degli Obizzi on the use of images in the raising of children follows this religious performativity. He insists that if Bartolomea does not wish to have, or cannot have, so many paintings at home, that the nurse take the children to churches often, when offices are not being said, so that they can see holy pictures. He warns against gold and silver ornament and the more richly decorated images attracting more devotion than the old ones, despite what is represented. Later,

he instructs the making of an 'altaruzzo' or two in the home, under the dedication of the Saviour, whose feast is every Sunday, and to have three or four varied 'dossaluzzi', to make the children like sacristans, and that each feast that a 'little chapel' (cappelluzza) should be adorned:

Thus the children will be occupied in making garlands of flowers or herbs, and crowning Jesus, adoring the painted Virgin Mary, making candles, lighting and extinguishing them, distributing incense, keeping them clean, cleaning, making the altars ready, composing candles of pieces of wax, of earth; ... running to ring all the hours like they hear in churches, they can put on chemises like acolytes, ... and shown that which would make them true priests if they learn how to do it.

(Dominici, 1860, pp.146–7)

Although Dominici's instructions were written to Bartolomea and we have no indication of them being preached, there is evidence of such pretend altars being found in Florentine homes. Jacqueline Musacchio notes that in the 1390 inventory of Jacopo del Rosso there was a child's predella (Musacchio, 2008, p.43) and Bornstein concluded that the practice was common, using the bequest of 'a decorated altar that I have at home', as an example (Bornstein, 1998, p.191).

In this advice, touching, cleaning, holding and embracing are all as important as seeing. The religious world of late medieval Tuscany was tactile. The importance of the sense of touch is emphasised by the Dominican Fra Giordano da Rivalto (c.1260–1311) as it is the first one the body has, and that informs all other senses: 'Every animal has the sense of touch, even if it lacks other senses. The sense of touch is not confined to the hands, but is felt throughout the body. When the ear hears, it is because the voice touches the ear, and when the eye sees it is because it is touched by what it sees, and so on' (Giordano da Rivalto, 1867, pp.37–8). But this tactile devotional world was not without its dangers. San Bernardino warned against what was evidently a common practice, that of running to kiss the altar, or the sacred stone, chalice or paten, and reminded his listeners that they were to consider themselves unworthy of such privileges (Bernardino, 1935, p.89). The Episcopal Laws of Florence appealed for women not to rush towards the Host, which suggests once again that this religious fervour and emotion was associated with women rather than men (Trexler, 1971, p.65).

Nevertheless, some theologians sanctioned certain types of tactile devotional activities. Dominici advised Bartolomea degli Obizzi, for example, that if she had

a large cross in her room, she should embrace it repeatedly, to feel the fire for Christ burn in her, and she should bathe his hair with her tears, so as to feel all his love, his passion, her sins, and her misery, if she felt at night her flesh separated from him. She was not to worry about loss of sleep, but rejoice in being so close to her beloved (Dominici, 1860, p.61). The *vita* (life) of the Dominican holy woman Agnes of Montepulciano (d.1317) told of how she 'levitated to the Crucifix and remained there, hanging on it, kissing and hugging it, seemingly clinging to her beloved, so that all can see in manifest fashion the spiritual union of her internal unity with Christ through her embrace with a material image, and so that all can understand the elevation of her spirit as they consider the miraculous suspension of her body'. Her mantle was filled with manna, and a sweet smell was sensed. When the manna, which looked like snow from a distance, was approached, it became apparent that each flake was like a little snowflake in the shape of a cross (AS, Aprilis, vol.II, pp.792–3). When dying, the Servite tertiary Giuliana Falconieri (1270–1341) was unable to receive any food, including the Eucharist. She asked for the Eucharist to be brought to her so that she could kiss it, and, after being refused this by the priest, prayed that a veil be placed over her breast and the Eucharist be placed on that. When this was done, it sank into her breast and was never found. After her death, when her body was prepared for burial, the image of the Host, superimposed with an image of the cross was imprinted 'like a seal' on her breast (Brocchi, 1742, pp.9–11).

Clare of Montefalco (d.1308) represents one of the most complete examples of this kind of internalisation of Passion imagery. When dying she rebuked the nuns of her convent for making the sign of the cross over her, as she had Christ already crucified in her heart. This was in a literal sense – in an autopsy performed by the nuns, the instruments of the passion were found to be engraved on her heart (Menestò, 1996, p.116). Chiara Frugoni has demonstrated the ways in which meditation on the Passion of Christ produced visions in female mystic piety. In particular, she discusses the vision of Blessed Aldobrandesca of Pisa, who was visited by an angel carrying three bloody nails. The vision of three nails could be directly connected to Franciscan piety, as they are first referred to as three in number in the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* and are depicted in Nicola Pisano's *Crucifixion* in the pulpit of the Baptistery of Pisa (Frugoni, 1996, pp.104–29).³

It must be noted that seeing, particularly in the case of Clare of Montefalco, was much less important than

3 For Nicola Pisano's pulpit see http://www.wga.hu/html_m/p/pisano/nicola/1pisa_0.html

feeling. This is even more true of Margaret of Città di Castello (d. 1320), a Dominican tertiary who was both blind and crippled. Despite her blindness, she saw the Eucharist within her mind, and images of Sts John the Evangelist and Fortunatus were instrumental in her miraculous healing of a young girl (AS, Aprilis, vol. II, p. 191). She too internalised imagery – imagery which she could not have seen – and on her death she was found to have within her three stones on which were found little images (*imagunculae*), depicting the Nativity, with the Virgin, Child, two animals and St Joseph (AS, Januarius, vol. II, p. 191). Margaret of Ravenna (d. 1505), another blind holy woman, who also had deformed limbs, healed a crippled boy by telling him to go to the famous image of the Virgin that worked miracles (AS, Aprilis, vol. II, p. 163).⁴

Devotional images and the domestic realm

Images mattered in devotional experience and played a role in performative piety, as we have seen. In this section, I discuss more specifically the kinds of artworks that nuns and lay women used in their devotional practice, paying particular attention to small painted panels and winged tabernacles.

Women were encouraged to stay within their homes (Paolo da Certaldo, 1945, p. 59) and it was a commonplace in preaching that their appearance even in churches was problematic, with preachers and moralists accusing them of only being there to be seen by men or to gossip (Savonarola, 1845, pp. 72–3; Bernardino, 1953, p. 312; Randolph, 1997, pp. 17–41; Davis, 1998, pp. 19–38). The artworks that were touched as well as seen in devotional practice were most often not in churches but in domestic or conventual spaces. The popularity of small-scale panels in Italy was such that it has been compared to the popularity of books of hours in northwest Europe (Schmidt, 2005, p. 9).

The types of images that women had access to in their homes or convents included, then, small-scale portable panels or tabernacles, relief sculptures in marble and wood – or less expensive materials such as gesso – crucifixes, and models of the Christ Child or of saints. (Cooper, 2006a, p. 290). The fourteenth century saw a proliferation of small painted panels and winged tabernacles intended for personal or domestic devotion. These often depicted the crucified Christ, and/or the Virgin and Child surrounded by saints. David Wilkins has argued ‘that touching is

crucial in understanding these trecento triptychs. In their museum settings today we can no longer touch them’ and has discussed the performance of ritual in approaching such an object, unveiling or opening it, arranging oneself and possibly one’s household in front of it, at particular times of the day and week, and being drawn into a different, atemporal spiritual world (Wilkins, 2002, p. 376). He has also suggested that these images were probably primarily intended for the devotions of women, although probably rarely commissioned by them (p. 377). The space of the pious woman was a restricted one and even her visits to churches were to be conducted with care, such were the temptations offered to and by her gaze outside the home.

An example of how these panels may have satisfied tactile as well as visual senses can be found in the diary of the Florentine merchant, Giovanni Morelli (1371–1444). In language reminiscent of the female mystics, he wrote: ‘And having calmed my heart and my mind, my eyes turned to the right side of the true Crucified Christ, where, looking, at the foot of the Cross I saw the pure and his holy blessed Mother, who I considered full of the such sorrow and such sadness; and considering that my sins were the reason for such affliction, [...] but considering in the mind the sorrow of that pure Virgin, mother of the pure and precious Son, and considering the many dangers that from the day of his birth he had carried to the last in front of her eyes dead and broken by dissolute sinners’. Like the nun addressed in *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, Morelli related the sorrow of the Virgin to his own life and his sick young son, Alberto: ‘and remembering the sorrow that I carried for my son, strongly I began to be ashamed and it was no small time before I rose from prayer [...] rendering many thanks to God and to his blessed Saints, with great comfort, it appearing to me that it had to be done, many times, holding in my arms the panel, I kissed the Crucified Christ and the figure of his Mother and of the Evangelist’ (Giovanni Morelli, ‘Ricordi’ in Branca, 1986, pp. 308–11). Morelli also commented that his son, who died in 1406 aged ten, had demanded that the image of the Virgin be brought to him in his bed (p. 294).

As shown above, Morelli and his son embraced images. They embraced the material panel or cross that represented the beloved, perhaps little differently from the way in which photographs of loved ones are treasured, caressed, kissed and touched today. Although images could be ‘participatory intelligences’ (Trexler, 1980, p. 71), in that they behaved on occasion like human bodies and wept, bled, sweated, spoke and moved, their holiness was linked to what they

⁴ Although the source only refers to the image as follows, ‘quamdā Deiparae imaginem, plurimis miraculis id temporis celebrem’, it may be the sculpted icon known as the *Madonna Greca* which was believed to have miraculously arrived in Ravenna in 1100 and was housed in the church of S. Maria in Porto (Beltrami, 1791, p. 53).

represented, or, in some cases, to the spaces that they occupied. Images did not just represent, they could, in some ways, contain some of the holiness of what was represented (Baschet, 2008, p.42). Image, relic and reliquary could all therefore be appropriated by both gaze and touch, as in the case of a small fourteenth-century panel by the Sienese artist Lippo Vanni (fl. 1344–76), where the frame of the central panel functions as both image and reliquary. The central panel shows the Virgin and Child with SS. Aurea and John the Baptist, while St Dominic is depicted on the left wing. This combination of saints has led to the suggestion that the tabernacle was painted for the female Dominican convent of S. Aurea in Rome, a convent for which Vanni painted a large altarpiece in 1358. The size of the panel (49.4 x 45.4cm, when open) means that it could be held and easily transported for devotional

practice. The life of the Florentine lay holy woman Umiliana dei Cerchi (d. 1219) reveals that an image of the Virgin and Child was instrumental in her devotions, and, at the hour of her death, a 'portrait' of the Virgin that contained a lock of her hair as a relic was placed on her breast, comforting her in death and warding off the devil (Schuchman, 2009, p.383). As Maginnis points out, it is significant that a lay woman had painted images in her room, consisting of one image of the Virgin and Child on parchment and another on panel (Maginnis, 2001, p.16).

Small panels with female donors, depicted alone or with male donors, which may have been used in such devotions, are common. A panel in the Johnson Collection in Philadelphia (Figure 4.1), dating from c.1375 and depicting the mystic marriage of St Catherine of Alexandria with the adult Christ,

flanked by St Louis of Toulouse and a Clarissan nun, is one such example. The mystic marriage of St Catherine, where the virgin martyr is united with her heavenly spouse, Christ, is an ideal subject for nuns, echoing their own nuptial union with Christ, but it is also an apt metaphor for the soul's union with God. The scale of the figures is interesting, in that not all saints are painted in the same scale, although they occupy the same space. Louis of Toulouse is considerably smaller than St Catherine of Alexandria, although he is still larger than the kneeling donor figure. This could suggest an attention to the hierarchy of the main subject – the



Figure 4.1: Jacopo di Cione, *Mystic Marriage of St Catherine, with St Louis of Toulouse and a female donor*, c.1375–8, tempera on panel, 81.1 x 62cm. Philadelphia, Museum of Art, John G. Johnson Collection, no.6. (Photo: Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art)

mystic marriage – a marriage, or union with Christ, to which both Louis (a recent saint, canonised only in 1317) and the donor could aspire to and possibly reach, through penitential practice, before death, or, indeed, the donor could, through witnessing the mystical union of St Catherine be recording or marking her own nuptials with Christ, enacted when she professed as a Clarissan nun.

Touch seems to be given equal status to vision within these images. The joining of hands by the Virgin between Christ and St Catherine shows that this is the mystic marriage. Although St Louis and the Clarissan donor appear to witness the event, their gazes, if we accept the pictorial fictions, can only encompass an oblique view of the event. It is the viewer outside the pictorial space who witnesses both the mystical event and the donor figure. St Louis could be seen as a transitional figure, linking the holy figures of Christ, the Virgin and the virgin martyr Catherine, to his female Franciscan follower, the Clarissan nun. As what we see could not take place in physical and temporal reality, the viewer is joined with the donor and the holy figures in an atemporal relationship. The donor could thus be remembered in the prayers of other nuns of her order; they too followers of St Francis and mystically joined to Christ through their profession.

Small panels were commissioned for nuns, like the Clarissan nun above, but little is known about their placement and accessibility. Some convents had cells, which were furnished with panels, as was the case of the Dominican convent in Murano, where Giovanni Dominici himself advised on the programme (Schmidt, 2005, p.219). Another probable example

of a commission for a Clarissan house is the small panel in the Hunt Museum in Limerick, attributed to the school of Bernardo Daddi, which depicts the Crucifixion with St Clare, and a witnessing Franciscan male donor (Lawless, 2005) (Figure 4.2). Although the panel lacks a female donor figure, the prominence of St Clare suggests a Clarissan context, as the saint was not venerated in the first Franciscan order until the relatively late date of 1340 (Vauchez, 1993, p.418). It has been suggested that it was part of a diptych, with its counterpart being formed by a panel now in the New York Metropolitan Museum (Boskovits, 1984, pp.358, p.611). This depicts the Virgin and Child surrounded by Saints Louis of Toulouse, Catherine, Agnes, Elizabeth of Hungary, and in the foreground, John the Baptist,

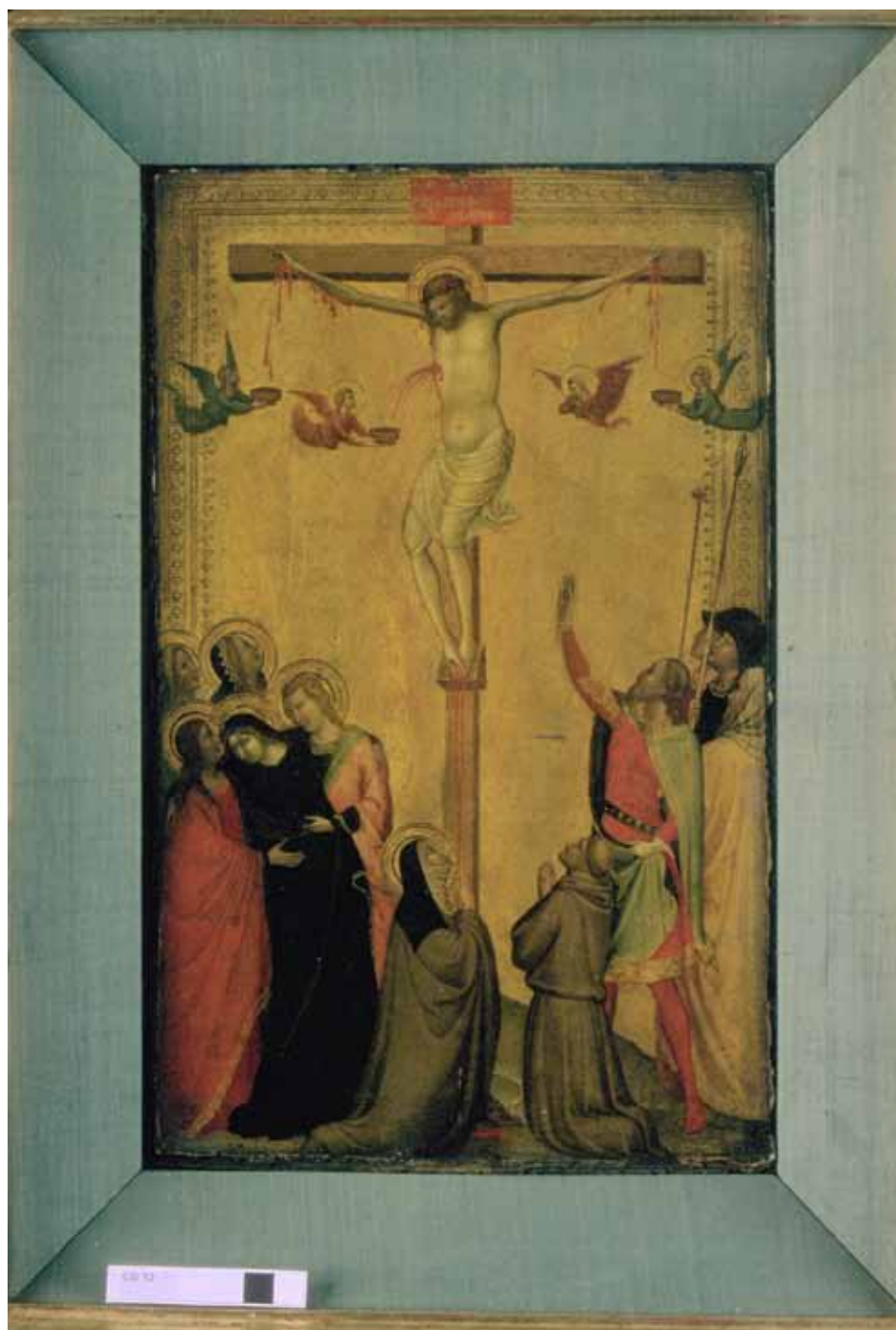


Figure 4.2: Bernardo Daddi (studio), *Crucifixion with Franciscan friar and St Clare*, c.1330–60, tempera and gold on panel, 33 x 21 cm. Limerick, Hunt Museum. (Photo: Courtesy of the Hunt Museum, Limerick)



Francis, Anthony of Padua and John the Evangelist (Figure 4.3). The affection towards the Christ Child advocated by the author of the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* could easily be evoked by this panel, with the Child reaching over to pat the lamb held by St Agnes.

The tangibility of the lamb held by Agnes and the playing attitude of the Child are indicative of an intimate, maternal piety of a kind exemplified by the 'holy dolls' often caressed by both nuns and secular women. For instance, the Vallombrosan nuns of S. Giovanni Evangelista in Florence celebrated the feasts of their founder, Beata Umiltà and her successor, Beata Margherita (Margaret of Faenza), by displaying the doll of the Christ Child that both had caressed when they were alive (AS, Augustii, vol.5, p.845). Klapisch-Zuber cites a number of examples of women receiving such dolls in their wedding trousseau, such as Antonia Rinieri, on her marriage to Niccolò Altoviti in 1486, whose gift was 'a child dressed in fine linen in the

Figure 4.3: Bernardo Daddi (studio), *Virgin and Child with Saints Louis of Toulouse, Catherine, Agnes, Elizabeth of Hungary, John the Baptist, Francis, Anthony of Padua and John the Evangelist*, c.1330–60, tempera and gold on panel, 33 x 20.6cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 41.100.15. (Photo: Art Resource)



Figure 4.4: Bernardo Daddi, *Virgin and Child with Saints and donors*, 1333, tempera and gold on panel, 88 x 97cm (central panel). Florence, Museo del Bigallo. (Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY)

image of Our Lord' (Klapisch-Zuber, 1985, p.312). The caressing and embracing of such dolls played a part not only in affective piety, but also, at least for secular women, in performative maternity.

Moving from convent (the institutional-domestic setting) to the *casa*, the shared intimacy of family devotion and the invitation to prayer evoked by holy images is suggested by the 1333 winged triptych of Bernardo Daddi now in the Museo del Bigallo in Florence. In the central compartment, the Virgin and Child are surrounded by fourteen male saints, and flanked by a male and a female donor. On the inside left wing is the Nativity, and on the right, the Crucifixion with St Francis. In the spandrels is found the narrative of St Nicholas rescuing and restoring the little Adeoatus (Figure 4.4). On the outside of the wings is found the popularly invoked saint for protection in childbirth, Margaret, with Catherine, Martin and

Christopher. The scene of Christ recommending his mother to the care of St John the Evangelist could serve as a reminder to the young men of the family of their duties towards a widowed mother or sisters, particularly relevant in a society in which widows' rights often had to be defended (Lawless, 2003, pp.20–39). St Christopher, the giant ferryman who carried the Christ Child across a river, patron saint of travellers and guardian against sudden death, was important in a mercantile society where men often spent years abroad due to trade. Margaret's protection during childbirth ensured her popularity, particularly in domestic settings (Musacchio, 1999, p.142). Catherine was one of the most popular saints of the middle ages and was singled out by contemporary Dominicans Giordano da Pisa (Giordano da Rivalto, 1867, p.332) and Domenico Cavalca (Cavalca, 1837, p.100) as an example of strength and piety.



Figure 4.5: Master of the Infancy of Christ (attrib.), formerly attributed to Jacopo di Cione, *Virgin and Child with donors*, c.1360–65, tempera and gold on panel, 60 x 35cm. Florence, Accademia, no. 8465. (Photo: Nicolo Orsi Battaglini/Art Resource, NY)

The interior of the tabernacle presents the Virgin and a playful Child, reaching up to her cheek. Moving with the 'eyes of the mind' from the Nativity on the left, to the Virgin and Child in the centre, to the Crucifixion on the right, the viewer is taken from birth of the incarnate Christ to the moment of his death and is violently reminded of his sacrifice by the blood spurting from his body, the same body that will be consumed in the Eucharist. A more recent and familiar saint than the martyrs of the Roman persecutions is placed at the foot of the cross – Francis – who can act as mediator between the world of the Italian city-state and that of the Crucified Christ. He can also serve, like his friars, as an example of how to pray, kneeling at the foot of the cross, hands joined, head raised in contemplation. The spandrels, showing scenes from the life of St Nicholas in which the saint saves a nobleman's child who had been taken captive and restores him to his parents, is another scene particularly appropriate for a domestic context.

Another male and female donor are found, this time side by side, and beside the Virgin and Child, in the central panel of a winged triptych attributed to the Master of the Infancy of Christ (Boskovits and Tartuferi, 2003, pp.116–21) (Figure 4.5). On the left wing are saints Catherine of Alexandria, John the Baptist, Elizabeth of Hungary and Anthony Abbot. Elizabeth of Hungary, having been appropriated by the Franciscan Third Order, was an ideal role model for a lay penitent woman. Anthony Abbot was popularly invoked against not only St Anthony's fire but a wide range of other illnesses and, in particular, plague. On the right panel, there is the Crucifixion of Christ with the Virgin, St John the Evangelist, St Mary Magdalen, and mourning angels catching Christ's blood. Mary Magdalen is, of course, the penitent saint par excellence, and her pose, clutching the cross with her head pressed against it, is almost a visual example of the devotions advised by Antoninus and Dominici and performed by saints such as Agnes of Montepulciano and Maddalena Albrizzi. The lunettes are occupied by Gabriel on the left and the Virgin Annunciate on the right, thus the very moment

of Incarnation is linked to the material flesh of the Virgin and Child in the centre and the crucified Christ, whose flesh and blood, the very blood being caught by angels, will be consumed in the Eucharist.

Conclusion

These are just a few of many examples of small Florentine art objects which, with their glowing, jewel like colours and shimmering gold backgrounds can easily be imagined as instruments of prayer, leading to contemplation and, in some cases, mystical union with Christ. These art works could be carried, held and kissed, their representations could be internalised, and their presence in the home or convent cell rendered that space holy. In tandem, devotional texts and sermons emphasised bodily compassion with the life, sufferings and death of Christ. Returning to the *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, an extract from which forms the epigraph of this essay, we see sprinkled throughout the text invocations to engage the senses. When describing the Nativity of Christ, for example, the author calls on the reader to 'see the delicious food prepared for you here', advising that 'to taste its sweetness you must chew it diligently'. He goes on to ask the devotee to 'kiss the beautiful little feet of the infant Jesus', as well as to 'gaze on his face' (Johannes de Caulibus, 1961, pp.30, 38). The devotee is asked to go to the manger: 'every faithful soul and especially a religious should visit the Lady at the manger at least once daily in the period between the Nativity of the Lord and the Purification, to adore the infant Jesus and His mother, thinking affectionately of their poverty, humility, and benignity' (pp.55–6). One is easily reminded by such examples of performative piety of Dominici's invocations to Bartolomea degli Obizzi to erect her own 'altaruzzo' in the home, of the 'holy dolls' held and caressed by women and of the small-scale intimacy of images of the Virgin and Child for the domestic realm. However, often images were but tools to lead to a higher state of contemplation, in which 'it is suitable for the contemplator to be mute, deaf, and blind' (p.279) so that the soul is lost in union and rapture with the Lord.

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