# PERFORMING THE RENAISSANCE BODY AND MIND: SOMAESTHETIC STYLE AND DEVOTIONAL PRACTICE AT THE SACRO MONTE DI VARALLO

**Allie Terry-Fritsch**

**Abstract**

*This essay examines the somaesthetic experience of renaissance pilgrims to the Sacro Monte di Varallo, a late fifteenth-century simulation of the Holy Land located in northern Italy. It reconstructs how pilgrims once cultivated their bodies and minds to enhance aesthetic and devotional experience to offer a re-evaluation of artistic style at the site. Built by a team of architects, painters and sculptors at the behest of Franciscan friars, the Sacro Monte di Varallo transformed the mountainous terrain of the Val Sesia into a 'true representation' of Bethlehem and Jerusalem. The Holy Land was presented to the pilgrim in a series of interactive spaces housed in independent architectural units, each containing life-sized wooden or terracotta sculptures of Biblical figures adorned with real hair, clothes and shoes, and situated in frescoed narratival environments. Pilgrims were led to each architectural site along a fixed path and encountered the Biblical scenes in a strict sequence that was narrated by a Franciscan friar. If the pilgrim engaged in proper performances of body-mindfulness, the site served as a pilgrimage destination that was equally enriching as 'the real thing'. The essay questions how the somaesthetics of experience at Varallo served to enfold pilgrims into multi-sensory, immersive scenarios and thereby allowed pilgrims to activate the art and architecture of the Franciscan campus in personalised ways. Through their physical and mental participation in the works, pilgrims actively constructed the means for the art and architecture of the holy mountain to fulfill and even surpass the power of the real Holy Land.*

**Keywords:** Gaudenzio Ferrari, pilgrimage, somaesthetics, *sacri monti*, Holy Land, Fra Bernardino Caimi, Franciscan, prosthetic memory, *meraviglia*, renaissance viewers
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**Biographical note**

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# PERFORMING THE RENAISSANCE BODY AND MIND: SOMAESTHETIC STYLE AND DEVOTIONAL PRACTICE AT THE SACRO MONTE DI VARALLO[1]

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This essay examines the ways in which renaissance pilgrims to the Sacro Monte di Varallo, a late fifteenth-century simulation of the Holy Land located in northern Italy, cultivated their bodies and minds to enhance aesthetic and devotional experience at the site (Figure 7.1: Aerial view of the *Sacro Monte di Varallo*: http://www.parks.it/riserva.sacro.monte.varallo/Epun.php). Built by a team of architects, painters and sculptors at the behest of Franciscan friars, the Sacro Monte di Varallo transformed the mountainous terrain of the Val Sesia into a 'true representation' of Bethlehem and Jerusalem. The Holy Land was presented to the pilgrim in a series of interactive spaces housed in independent architectural units, each containing life-sized wooden or terracotta sculptures of Biblical figures adorned with real hair, clothes and shoes, and situated in frescoed narratival environments (Figure 7.2). Pilgrims were led to each architectural site along a fixed path and encountered the Biblical scenes in a strict sequence that was narrated by a Franciscan friar. If the pilgrim engaged in proper performances of body-mindfulness, the site served as a pilgrimage destination that was equally enriching as 'the real thing' (Orvell, 1989).

The artistic patrimony of the Sacro Monte di Varallo has been the focus of art historical attention in recent decades, particularly in discussions regarding the expanding field of 'renaissance art'. The dramatic, and sometimes quite literal, verism at the site, including the real clothing and hair on the life-sized, delicately carved figures and the minute details of everyday life incorporated into the dioramic environments, were classified in the late nineteenth century as charming crafts that appealed to a deeply pious, but largely unrefined group of viewers (Butler, 1888). However, art historians since the last quarter of the twentieth century have re-evaluated the visual aesthetic of the Sacro Monte di Varallo not only as 'popular art' but as a legitimate alternative to the highly praised academic style of the dominant artistic centres of Florence, Rome and Venice. In 1978, Rudolf Wittkower brought serious attention to the implications of such an alternate style, noting that the highly effective and popular art forms exhibited on the holy mountain were not classified as 'high' or 'low' by the original artists or audiences at the site, but rather by a highly biased discipline of the history of art centuries after inception (Wittkower, 1978, pp. 175–83). Alessandro Nova has demonstrated convincingly that the polychrome figures and frescoed scenes at the Sacro Monte di Varallo appealed equally to a local, provincial public and sophisticated, courtly audiences from Milan and beyond (Nova, 1995, pp. 112–26). Yet, while further art-historical studies have shed light on the potential ways in which devotional practices and politico-economic pressures impacted artistic style at the site, the sculptures and frescoes still remain outside of mainstream discussions of renaissance aesthetic sensibility.

This essay contributes a further consideration of renaissance artistic style on the Sacro Monte di Varallo by reconstructing the 'somaesthetic' experience of pilgrims during the earliest phase of the site between the 1490s and the 1520s. Somaesthetics – a term derived from the combination of *soma*, or body, and *aesthetics*, or sensory appreciation – refers to the practice of cultivating the body and mind to enhance sensory appreciation and creative self-fashioning (Shusterman, 2000a, 262–283; Shusterman, 2000b; Shusterman, 2008). As this essay argues, the Franciscans at the Sacro Monte of Varallo purposefully incorporated somaesthetic strategies into the architectural and decorative design of their pilgrimage site to link the performative body of the viewer to the works of art that were made to accompany these experiences. While the term performative has been used in scholarship to reference a variety of complex citational processes, its use here draws on the tradition of approaching

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Figure 7.2: View of the *Procession of the Magi*, *c.*1516, sculptures and frescoes by Gaudenzio Ferrari and assistants. (Photo: Stefan Fritsch)

the body as 'an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities' to construct identity within 'social temporality' (Butler, 1988, p.521). The founders of the Sacro Monte di Varallo had first-hand knowledge of the pilgrimage itinerary at Jerusalem and comprehended the intense bodily and mental exertion that went into the travel to and experience of the Holy Land. They translated this body-mindfulness into an interactive itinerary that relied on the constituting acts of pilgrims' subjective experience to transfer the sacred power of the original to its reproduction at the Sacro Monte di Varallo.

To activate the body and mind of the pilgrim, the physical performance of viewing at the Sacro Monte di Varallo accentuated awareness in all sensory receptors. The site was designed to physically challenge while simultaneously mentally engage pilgrims as they made their way through the steep and winding landscape of the site. Pilgrims interacted with visual and other sensory environments while engaged in body-mind practices, thus creating the conditions for a heightened somaesthetic encounter. Unlike the experience of today's visitor to the site, renaissance pilgrims were not forced into fixed viewing positions outside of the chapel proper. Rather, pilgrims were invited to enter into the architectural environments and to touch, smell, taste and hear, in addition to view the holy simulacra. These intimate interactions with the works served to enfold the pilgrims into their compositions and thereby allowed pilgrims to activate the scenes in personalised ways. Thus, the consideration of somaesthetic style at the Sacro Monte di Varallo necessarily takes into account the renaissance pilgrims who were integral to the completion of the work of art. Through their physical and mental participation in the works, pilgrims actively constructed the means for the art and architecture of the holy mountain to fulfill and even surpass the power of the real Holy Land.

## Founding a holy land: miraculous signs and performative engagement

To substitute the Sacro Monte di Varallo, a pilgrimage site constructed on terrain untouched by Christ, for the experience of pilgrimage to the real Jerusalem entailed the construction of both a compelling explanation of the site's substitutive sacrality and the

promise of a transformative experience. Fra Bernardino Caimi, the Franciscan founder of the Sacro Monte of Varallo, ensured that his new holy land provided both. In 1478, Fra Caimi returned to Italy from his position as custodian of the Franciscan-controlled Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. As a means to address the increasingly difficult conditions for Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem, due in no small part to the growing presence of Ottomans in the Holy Land and its surrounding territories, Fra Caimi actively sought a site in Italy that could replicate the experience of travel to it (Wittkower, 1978, p.175; Leatherbarrow, 1987, pp.107–9). According to a late-fifteenth-century inscription on the earliest architectural site at the Sacro Monte di Varallo, dated to 1491, Fra Caimi 'devised the sacred places on this mountain so that he who could not travel might see this Jerusalem' ('Frater Bernardinus Caymus de Mediolano … Sacra huius Montis excogitavit loca ut hic Hierusalem videat qui peragrare nequit'). Apparently, after searching in vain for a site like the Holy Land, he found himself in Varallo, where he 'had hardly got there before he felt himself rapt into an ecstasy, in the which he was drawn towards the Sacro Monte' (Butler, 1888, pp.37–8). At the top of the mountain, he understood 'at once its marvelous resemblance to Jerusalem', and 'threw himself on the ground and thanked God in a transport of delight' (pp.37–8). God clearly had bestowed the grace upon Fra Caimi to discover and understand the special qualities of the place.

Fra Caimi immediately sought and received permission and funding for the building of a 'Nuova Gerusalemme' on the mountain of Varallo. On 21 December 1486, Pope Innocent VIII authorised Fra Caimi to accept a donation of land to build a church dedicated to Santa Maria delle Grazie at the base of the mountain and the New Jerusalem complex on the 'super paretium' (Amm. Vescovile, 2003, p.4). His first commission on the mountain was an architectural reproduction of the Holy Sepulchre. Shortly after the ground was broken, workmen discovered another clear sign of God's divine grace and unambiguous confirmation of the site's sacrality: as recorded in its later inscription, a stone was found to be 'in all ways similar to the stone that covered the sepulchre of Christ in Jerusalem'. The 'miracle of the stone' – the discovery of a sign from God in the exact shape and size of the object that artists were prepared to create – set the stage for the authenticity of the pilgrimage site in material terms. The founder of the Sacro Monte di Varallo had demonstrated both his and the site's extraordinary holiness through an ecstatic experience, which led to a miraculous finding.

Pilgrims soon flocked to the mountain to visit the stone, which was integrated into an interactive architectural space representing the Holy Sepulchre. Within five years, a female pilgrim, Donna Agnese Botta, the sister of Ludovico il Moro's financial minister, was miraculously cured of an illness while at Varallo (Amm. Vescovile, 2003, p.5). Soon, other pilgrims began experiencing miracles at the site as well. The demonstration of miracles at a pilgrimage site served as unambiguous proof of the authenticity of its holy conduit (Vauchez, 2004, pp.9–14). For non-historical sites like Varallo that boasted neither real things nor real places, miracles were produced through God's grace, combined with proper prayer practices in front of and to specially charged objects. The emphasis on proper sequencing of actions and meditations ensured pilgrims of a legitimate pilgrimage experience, since many devotional practices performed in specific spaces throughout the mountain were in direct imitation of devotional practices in the real Holy Land. Further, as in the real Jerusalem, many of these choreographed prayer actions were rewarded with plenary indulgences endorsed by the pope. Such rewards provided tangible evidence of the official legitimacy of the site.

Figure 7.3: Map of the Sacro Monte di Varallo as arranged in 2012:
http://www.parks.it/riserva.sacro.monte.varallo/mapll.html
*While the original disposition of the* luoghi sancti *has changed significantly, the Holy Sepulchre (43), Crucifixion (38) and Bethlehem complex (5–8) retain their late-fifteenth-century and early-sixteenth-century positions and decoration.*

For a renaissance pilgrim to the holy mountain of Varallo in the first half of the sixteenth century, several interactive multi-media holy places were available for devotional practices. By 1493, the church and convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie were erected at the mountain's base. The church was the mandatory starting point for pilgrims to the Sacro Monte and the site of critical body-mind preparation for the pilgrim's encounter with the architectural sites – called *luoghi sancti* (or, holy places) – on the mountain above (Amm. Vescovile, 2003, p.5). Since the early fourteenth century, Franciscans held the coveted position as custodians of key Christian sites in the holy land, including the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, the Cenacle on Mount Zion and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem (Wharton, 2006, p.109; Rudy, 2011). Architectural structures representing each of these Franciscan-controlled holy places were included in the Sacro Monte's original layout.

In the southwestern corner of the mountain, the Piazza del Tempio contained the original pilgrims'

fountain and several architectural buildings that housed interactive environments. Unfortunately, much of the original artistic programme of this area, constructed from the last decade of the fifteenth century to the first decades of the sixteenth century, is largely lost. Many of the buildings and the scenes housed within them were either destroyed or repurposed in the Counter-Reformation transformation of the site and in subsequent restoration and building campaigns (Göttler, 2013). Despite these losses, scholars have used archival and material evidence to reconstruct the spatial programme of the original pilgrimage site, that is, the disposition of the early *luoghi sancti* across the Franciscan campus.

Certain spaces bear no material trace of their late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth-century artistic histories. For example, the structures once housing the representations of the *Garden of Gethsemane, Ascension,* and the *Lamentation/Deposition of Christ* are entirely replaced by later artistic interventions. Other spaces partially preserve their original decoration, albeit in a repurposed fashion. The earliest known frescoes on the holy mountain were painted by Gaudenzio Ferrari inside the architectural structure housing the scene of the *Pairing of the Garments*; the space was repurposed in the first half of the seventeenth century to house the representation of the *Pietà*, so the original frescoes no longer fully correspond to the three-dimensional narrative currently played out before them (Butler, 1888, p.12; Amm. Vescovile, 2003, p.52). In other cases, artistic works from original environments are preserved, although they have been integrated into new environments. The original space dedicated to the *Capture of Christ* on Mount Calvary was completed by 1500 and filled with wooden statues by an anonymous artist. These statues are still extant at Varallo, although incorporated into a seventeenth-century space dedicated to the same theme in 'Pilate's Palace' and completed with further sculptures by Giovanni and Melchior d'Enrico (Amm. Vescovile, 2003, p.34). Similarly, the wooden statues of the apostles at the *Last Supper* on Mount Zion created by an unknown artist are still extant, although relocated and resituated within an eighteenth-century chapel decorated by Antonio Orgiazzi (Figure 7.4).

The best-preserved artistic spaces from the original artistic programme of the pilgrimage site are found in the architectural complexes representing Bethlehem and Mount Calvary. The Bethlehem complex featured interconnected and interactive artistic environments designed and realized by Gaudenzio Ferrari between the 1490s and 1528. Set at a geographic distance from

Figure 7.4: *The Last Supper*, late-fifteenth-/early-sixteenth-century sculptures of apostles incorporated into eighteenth-century chapel with frescoes and sculptural decoration by Antonio Orgiazzi, Sacro Monte di Varallo. (Photo: Stefan Fritsch)

and below the sites of 'Jerusalem' found at the peak of the mountain, the *luogo sancto* was made, according to Fra Caimi and the other Franciscans at the site, in perfect imitation of the grotto at Bethlehem. The decorated spaces dedicated to the *Nativity* and the *Adoration of the Shepherds* already were completed by the end of the fifteenth century (Figures 7.5 and 7.6), and two further interactive environments representing the *Procession of the Magi* and the *Presentation of Christ in the Temple* were integrated

Figure 7.5: Gaudenzio Ferrari, *The Nativity*, *c.*1515, Sacro Monte di Varallo.
(Photo: Santuario del Sacro Monte di Varallo)

Figure 7.6: Gaudenzio Ferrari, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1513–15, Sacro Monte di Varallo.
(Photo: Stefan Fritsch)

into the architectural complex between 1515 and 1528 (Amm. Vescovile, 2003, pp.16–9) (Figures 7.2 and 7.7). While each of these representations visualised a distinct biblical narrative within a defined space, they also communicated to one another across the span of the entire architectural complex since the spaces were arranged in topomimetic relation to the spatial disposition of the Grotto of Bethlehem. Thus pilgrims were offered an imaginative encounter with both sacred history in the individual scenes and a performative engagement with the physical configuration of space as would contemporary pilgrims to the Holy Land itself.

On the hill above, the structures designated as the Holy Sepulchre and Mount Calvary still retain much of their original, early-sixteenth-century decorative programmes. As mentioned earlier, the Holy Sepulchre was Fra Caimi's first realised holy place on the mountain (Figure 7.8). Constructed by 1491, the physical configuration of space within the Holy Sepulchre at Varallo was based on the aedicula in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem (Ousterhout, 1981, pp.311–21). The interior featured artistic works by Gaudenzio Ferrari made in the early sixteenth century, including a polychrome statue of the kneeling *Mary Magdalene* and a fresco of the *Angel of the Resurrection* in the atrium of the sepulchre and a

Figure 7.7: Gaudenzio Ferrari, *The Presentation in the Temple*, 1515–16, Sacro Monte di Varallo. (Photo: Stefan Fritsch)

Figure 7.8: Exterior view of the *Holy Sepulchre*, constructed by 1491, interior decoration by Gaudenzio Ferrari in first decade of sixteenth century; with later additions, Sacro Monte di Varallo. (Photo: Stefan Fritsch)

recumbent statue of the *Dead Christ* placed inside the tomb in the inner chamber. As discussed more fully below, the architectural and decorative complex of the Holy Sepulchre at Varallo was designed purposefully to foster an intimate and affective relationship between the pilgrim and Christ, which culminated in a mental and somatic embracing of the dead saviour. Pilgrims would configure their bodies in relation to the shifting architectural proportions of the building, bend over to accommodate low ceilings, crawl on knees to access the inner chamber, and press up against and even climb into the tomb of Christ.

The scene of the *Crucifixion* on Mount Calvary at Varallo is also one of the three original *luoghi sancti* designed by Fra Caimi (Figure 7.9). Built on the site of an older chapel dedicated to the same theme, the *Crucifixion* features panoramic frescoes, delicately carved and painted sculptures, and a fully immersive environment that encouraged pilgrims to step into and participate in the narrative. The monumental scale of the room, coupled with the continuous frescoes on the curved wall surfaces and arched ceiling, endowed the scene with magnificence. Sculpted figures placed on the three crosses and at their base recreated the scene of Christ's death in stark naturalism. As Christ bows his head in acceptance of his fate, his battered flesh on the cross visualised to pilgrims his bodily suffering. As Alessandro Nova has suggested, pilgrims once walked into the space and became physically immersed in the scene (Nova, 1995, p.123). Surrounding the pilgrim in 360 degrees, sculpted and frescoed onlookers offered distinct scenarios of emotional responses to the death of Christ. The Virgin mother swoons with arms outstretched, while other mothers painted on the wall behind her and in sculpted form before her protectively clasp their own children close to their bodies. Making his or her way through the chapel – originally from the door to the right of the *Crucifixion* through the scene itself and out the door to the left – the pilgrim configured his or her own body and mind in relation to these mimetic characters and imaginatively inserted himself into the narrative (Nova, 1995, p.123).

Originally, the pilgrims' trail between the various architectural units on the Sacro Monte di Varallo followed topographical cues connected to the disposition and layout of the Holy Land and its monuments. As Annabel Wharton has argued convincingly, the earliest phase of Varallo's sacred

Figure 7.9: Frontal view of the *Crucifixion*, 1510–23, Sacro Monte di Varallo. (Photo: Stefan Fritsch)

space – from the last decade of the fifteenth century through the first half of the sixteenth century – was purposefully complex so as to mimetically index the space of Jerusalem as it was experienced by pilgrims at that time (Wharton, 2006, pp.130–1). The paths and chapels of Varallo were 'disordered by geography, marked by incoherence, [and] interrupted by overlap' so as 'to replicate the experience of the pilgrim in a complex space' just as in the real Holy Land (pp.130–1). A Franciscan friar who accompanied the pilgrim resolved the site's illegibility by literally guiding the way to the appropriate chapels in the proper sequence.

The close accompaniment of the pilgrims at Varallo by Franciscan guides mimicked practices performed in the Holy Land itself. As Nine Miedema has described, Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem from the West resembled 'a guided tour as known from modern mass tourism' (Miedema, 1985, p.79; Peters, 1985, p.437). Due to practical reasons, the Franciscan friars in charge of these tours designed the itineraries according to a strict topographical sequence that presented the holy sites neither in correspondence with the Christological narrative nor in alignment with meditative practices such as the *Meditationes vitae Christi*. Pilgrims were forbidden to deviate from the Franciscan itinerary and were not allowed to visit sites on their own. Just as in modern tour groups, many pilgrims experienced 'a certain disappointment at the lack of liberty and at the brevity of their stay in the Holy Land' (Miedema, 1985, p.79). Even though such constrictions were disappointing for many pilgrims to the Holy Land, they were mimicked at the Sacro Monte di Varallo and promoted as authentic practice. As such, the pilgrims at Varallo embraced the guided itinerary in a way unlike their pilgrim counterparts in Jerusalem.

Despite the professed similarities between the real Holy Land and its representation at Varallo, the pilgrim's experience of the simulated *luoghi sancti* on the holy mountain was quite different from and, as some accounts profess, may have been even better than, 'the real thing'. As Georgia Frank has examined, early Christian pilgrims to the real Holy Land confronted landscapes that had been radically altered from their Biblical descriptions (Frank, 2000, pp.98–115). Since dusty voids inhabited the places where Christ and the Apostles once lived, Franciscans recited histories and prayers to verbally explicate the site and to excite the pilgrim's active imagination. Using the 'eye of faith', triggered by a glimpse of the physical place of a Biblical event, the pilgrim was transformed 'into a spectator at, perhaps even a participant in, an event from the Biblical past' (Frank, 2000, p.100). This mode of viewing inspired what Frank has called 'lingering vision', a prolonged visual engagement with the authentic space that allowed for a personalised, if imagined, recollection of the event (Frank, 2000, p.101). Further engagement was offered through the strategic touching of dirt, images or inscriptions that were attached to the physical site and could afford some form of tactile transfer of the real thing to the pilgrim. For those pilgrims who understood vision itself as a form of touching, the act of looking itself also 'touched' the Biblical past through the pilgrim's gaze (Hahn, 2000, pp.169–96; Camille, 2000, pp.197–223; Hahn, 2006, pp.44–64; Caviness, 2006, pp.65–86).

Fra Caimi had first-hand experience of pilgrims' experiences in the Holy Land, including the difficulties of imagining from a void, thus he designed the Sacro Monte di Varallo not as an imitation of the Holy Land but rather as a 'true representation' of the places there. As opposed to faithfully imitating the material culture (or lack thereof) at the holy sites in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, the pilgrimage site of the Sacro Monte of Varallo imaginatively reconstructed narrative episodes from the life of Christ and the saints in life-sized environments specifically constructed for pilgrims. The Alpine conditions of Varallo, fundamentally different than the arid climate and landscape of Jerusalem, were incorporated into the physical fabric of the pilgrim's experience and used to create both a rigorous corporeal experience and a delightful, even ecstatic, experience of God's creation on earth. During the day, stunning vistas of the intersections of expansive sky and surrounding mountain peaks, as well as views down into the river valley below, were offered from on top of Varallo's sacred mountain. In addition to the travel to the site itself and the performance of Franciscan body-mind prayers at Santa Maria della Grazie at the base, pilgrims used the daylight hours to visit the chapels, privately meditate, and perform penitence through flagellation and confession (Hood, 1985, pp.302–3). They travelled the ascents and descents of the interconnected pathways of the built environment or rested under the shade of a portico of one of the *luoghi sancti* while admiring the spectacular expression of nature around them. At night, when devotional exercises were practised by the light of torches, the Alpine breezes cooled the air. The torches punctuated the darkened sky and marked the occasion as 'out-of-time', special and important (Grimes, 1996).

Also unlike the experience of the real Holy Land, each devotional space on the Sacro Monte di Varallo highlighted Christ's incarnation as a key feature of its decoration, from the display of his chubby flesh as an infant in the crib of the *Nativity* to his ripped and scourged flesh on the cross. The interiors and

sometimes exteriors of the architectural environments were fantastically populated by life-sized sculptures and filled with details that connected the pilgrims' everyday experiences to those of Christ's, however anachronous they might have been (Wittkower, 1978, p.177). The intense focus on the physical presence of Christ and the saints, displayed through the spectacular realism of the multi-media scenes in ways that were unavailable to the pilgrim to Jerusalem, served as a strategy to substitute Varallo for the real Holy Land by tangibly connecting the pilgrim to the distant Biblical past through 'material stuff' (Bynum, 2011).

This materially-rich variation of the holy land was attractive to renaissance pilgrims for its performative possibilities. Although Franciscan devotional practices – promoted by Saint Francis himself and employed from Saint Bonaventure to Bernard of Clairvaux – already encouraged the active physical and emotional participation of a believer in Christ's life and death, the Franciscan guides at the Sacro Monte di Varallo were able to couple their body-mind cultivation techniques with the built environment of the pilgrimage site to elicit powerful emotional connections between the renaissance pilgrims and the Biblical past (Hood, 1984, p.307). To heighten the devotional experience at Varallo, the Franciscan friars guided pilgrims to touch simulacra during their prayers. For example, pilgrims were encouraged to hold a sculpture of the infant Jesus in their arms in the spaces dedicated to the *Nativity* and the *Adoration of the Shepherds* in 'Bethlehem'; later in the itinerary, pilgrims would kneel at the base of the cross, where relics allegedly brought from the Holy Land by Fra Caimi were placed, and rubbed personal prayer beads and other devotional items against them to transfer their holy power (Hood, 1984, p.306; Nova, 1995, p.117; Lasansky, 2010, p.262). Such practices physically implicated the pilgrim within the affective narrative of the multi-media spaces and, at key points in the pilgrimage itinerary, reproduced the actions of contemporaries to the real holy places in Bethlehem and Jerusalem.

Pilgrims to the real Holy Land routinely rubbed the surfaces of sacred objects and monuments, above all the Holy Sepulchre, to transfer their sacred power to their hands and the objects they held. Although most of the objects at Varallo did not boast authentic connections to the ancient Biblical past, tactile contact with the surrogate bodies and relics provided a tangible means to inhabit the identity positions of Christ's mother, his followers and his prosecutors, as well as to perform the actions of renaissance-era pilgrims to Holy Land sites. That is, the performative engagement with material things –anthropomorphic statues, inhabited landscapes and concrete objects – fostered an environment in which the pilgrim's body replicated both the bodily performances of Biblical people, such as Mary holding her infant son, and reproduced the experience of accessing contemporary relics, such as the tomb of Christ, in Jerusalem. Thus the site's substitutive sacrality and promise of transformation rested with the participation of pilgrims in actively constructing narratives about the site's material objects and landscape.

## Performing the holy land: renaissance pilgrims and somaesthetic devotion

To begin to understand how and why the artistic programme at the Sacro Monte di Varallo was so effective to a late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth-century audience, the site must be viewed as it originally was intended. That is, any assessment of artistic style at Varallo must take into account the original viewing conditions of the pilgrims, which demanded the full body-mind immersion of pilgrims into the works. To ensure optimal conditions for transformative experiences on the Sacro Monte di Varallo, the Franciscans supplied what Michel de Certeau has called 'strategies' for devotional experience at Varallo, while the pilgrims employed 'tactics' to perform a 'spatial acting-out of the place' (de Certeau, 1984, pp.97–8). Strategies, for de Certeau, are the various methods used by those in control of spaces to regulate and manipulate behaviours within them and tactics are the methods employed by the actual users of those spaces; these users are not in possession of the space, but, nonetheless, they occupy it and manoeuvre through it according to either pre-established rules or by alternative routes (de Certeau, 1984, p.xix). Specific strategies implemented by the Franciscans at the Sacro Monte di Varallo include leading pilgrims in choreographed devotional exercises, imposing a fixed sequence of visitation to the holy places and staging dramatic lighting conditions for pilgrims' somaesthetic encounters within the interactive spaces. Combined with the architectural and decorative programme devised by the site's Franciscan founders, these strategies were designed to foster pilgrims' heightened body-mind awareness in relation to sacred history. Through their tactics of pilgrimage prayer in and among the holy places on the mountain, the pilgrims practised the place and, in so doing, they actualised the possibilities offered by the decorative and architectural programme (de Certeau, 1984, p.117).

In one of the earliest descriptions of the experience of visiting the Sacro Monte of Varallo, dated 29 September 1507, Girolamo Morone, the humanist

and then ambassador of the King of France (and later Grand Chancellor of the Duchy of Milan), explained to the poet Lancino Curzio how his Franciscan guide made a great impact on his reception of the sacred sites:

> And so, at the foot of the mountain, I was met by a priest, a leader of the order, a man both religious and most experienced with the site where the body of Jesus was actually buried. Leading me across neighboring hills – one moment climbing, the next moment with an easy descent – he brought me into individual chapels in which images are exhibited … And he kept assuring me that all these things had been made like the place of the real Sepulchre with the same proportions, the same architecture, and with the same paintings and shapes. Truly, my Lancino, I have never seen anything more religious, more devout. *I have never seen anything that could pierce the heart more*, which could compel one to neglect everything else and follow Christ alone. Let cease henceforth those so-called Roman stations; *let end even the Jerusalem pilgrimage*. This new and most pious work repeats everything, and *by the very simplicity of the craft and the artless architecture, the ingenious site surpasses all antiquity.*
>
> (Wharton, 2006, p.98)

According to Morone's emphatic praise, Varallo's 'ingenious' ability to incite devotion was based on three primary conditions. First, a Franciscan guide, who had direct familiarity with the sacred sites of the real Holy Land, determined the itinerary, led the devotional exercises and accompanied the pilgrim at all times. Second, due to the geographical location of the site and the spatial configuration of its individual parts, the pilgrim necessarily used his or her body in an ambulatory fashion and often was encouraged to actively configure his or her body in relation to the images and spaces. Third, the overall aesthetic sensibility of the site was pious, simple and perhaps even 'artless'. As Morone emphasised, when the works of art were combined with the choreographed viewing itinerary, the site 'could pierce the heart' and 'compel one to … follow Christ alone'. At the Sacro Monte of Varallo, therefore, Franciscan sensibility, physical activity and artistic engagement provided the means for transformative devotion.

Figure 7.10: Gaudenzio Ferrari, Choir Screen with *Scenes from the Life of Christ*, 1513, Santa Maria delle Grazie, Varallo. (Image in the public domain)

According to a published guidebook for pilgrims, dated 1514, pilgrims to the Sacro Monte of Varallo were required to first stop at the Franciscan church of Santa Maria delle Grazie at the 'foot of the mountain', that is, the base town of Varallo, to perform devotional exercises that purified their bodies and minds (Durio, 1926; Hood, 1984, p.300; Nova, 1995, p.115). Built simultaneously with the first chapels on the holy mountain above it, and completed by 1493, the church was an integral component of the 'Holy Land' experience (Amm. Vescovile, 2003, p.5). Pilgrims entered into the barn-like space of the Italian gothic church to view vividly coloured scenes painted by Gaudenzio Ferrari in 1513 on the monumental choir screen (Figure 7.10). As they looked upward at twenty-one distinct episodes of the joys and sorrows of Christ's life and Passion, pilgrims listened and responded to the verbal cues of Franciscan guides, who exhorted them to get physical with their emotions. As instructed in the devotional tract given to pilgrims at the site, weeping was encouraged as a sign of a pilgrim's sadness of Christ's suffering and self-flagellation was viewed as a means to access Christ's pain (Durio, 1926; Nova, 1995, p.115). Episodes illustrated on the screen provided graphic focus for such meditations, as did the multi-media environments on the holy mountain itself, also created by Gaudenzio Ferrari between 1505–28.

On the mountain above the church, pilgrims channelled this meditative focus to the artistic environments found within each of the *luoghi sancti*. As previously described, the architectural complex representing 'Bethlehem', including its sculptures, figures, and overall spatial plan, is among a select number of structures that largely retains its early-sixteenth-century artistic programme. It thereby provides a material testament of the founders' original aims to combine aesthetic and somatic devotional experience. Renaissance pilgrims accessed the building from a steep path surrounded by trees and a terraced landscape. The entrance led to a massive, dioramic space filled with life-sized, polychrome terracotta statues and densely populated wall murals that stretched from the floor of the room to its high, curved ceiling (Figures 7.2, 7.11–7.13). Constructed between 1519 and 1528, and decorated by Gaudenzio Ferrari, the space presented an awe-inspiring scene of the *Procession of the Magi*.

Viewed frontally, the composition of the scene is arranged from left to right, with life-sized sculptures of three Magi, their attendants and horses horizontally arranged across the space of the room (Figure 7.2). In the

Figure 7.11: Gaudenzio Ferrari, *The Procession of the Magi* (view of left corner), 1519–28, Sacro Monte di Varallo. (Photo: Stefan Fritsch)

foreground of the lower walls, Ferrari painted colourful crowds of men riding on horseback or processing on foot in unison with the sculpted Magian retinue before them (Figure 7.11). Fanciful scenes of pastoral life filled the middle ground of the wall and, on the curved ceiling, a brilliant blue sky streaked with white clouds stretched upward and over the heads of the pilgrims. Later interventions in the architecture abruptly dissected the frescoed walls to introduce a screened porch from which visitors today must stand to look at the scene. Most likely, the room once was analogous to the scenes surrounding the *Crucifixion* of Christ, which continue uninterrupted in 360 degrees around the room, enveloping the pilgrim within the spatial frame of the scene.

The first magus, dressed in a short-sleeved, gold brocade tunic with red *calzi* and blue boots on the far left of the scene, holds a golden box in his left hand (Figure 7.11). His terracotta face, framed by long brown horse hair and a curled beard, has been painted black to represent his African origins, according to the tradition of the three wise men's origins on the three known continents of the world (Trexler, 1997). The magus pauses to allow his male attendant to unfasten his spurs, an iconographical gesture familiar to Italian audiences since at least Gentile da Fabriano's altarpiece of *Adoration of the Magi*, painted for Palla Strozzi in

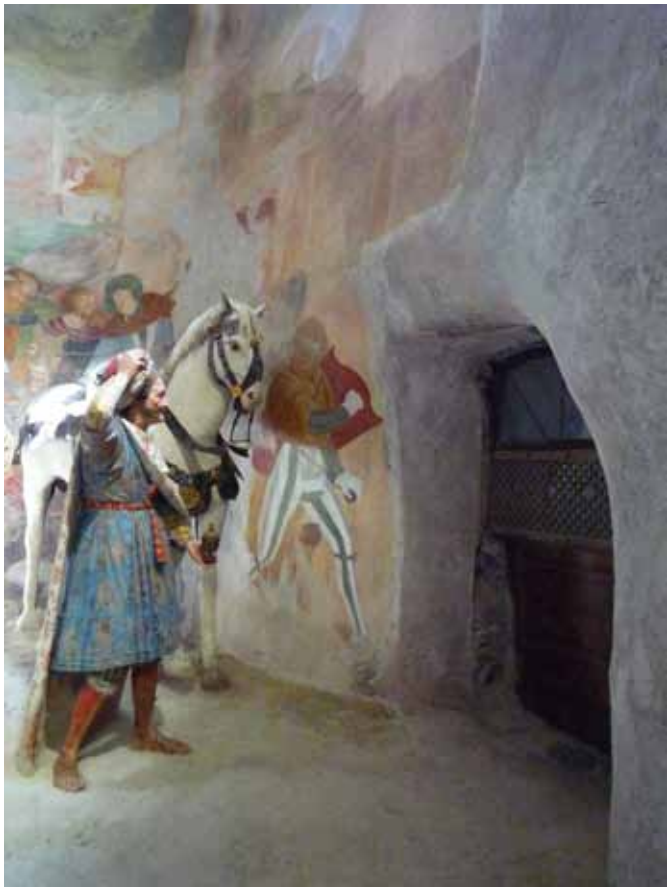

Figure 7.12: Gaudenzio Ferrari, *The Procession of the Magi* (view of right corner), 1519–28, Sacro Monte di Varallo. (Photo: Stefan Fritsch)

Figure 7.13: Gaudenzio Ferrari, *The Procession of the Magi* (view from grotto on far right), 1519–28, Sacro Monte di Varallo. (Photo: Stefan Fritsch)

Florence in 1423 (Terry-Fritsch, 2012a). Behind him, another male attendant, again painted black, looks upward toward a statue of a rearing horse, which literally bursts through the left wall. The second magus wears a blue tunic and red cape, and holds his gift for the Christ child in his left hand (Figure 7.2). He looks upward, presumably toward the star that guides them to the newly born Christ child, which is embedded in the ceiling just beyond the right wall. Melchior, the eldest of the three wise men located at the opposite end of the room, guides the entire procession toward the star through an opening in the far right wall, which leads directly to the scene of *Nativity* beyond in the grotto (Figures 7.12–7.13).

Although art historians have called the *Procession of the Magi* – and other multi-media scenes at Varallo – 'frozen' moments in a Biblical drama, the original viewing experience of renaissance pilgrims – at night, in the dark, and guided by Franciscans – activated the scenes and enlivened the figures in a personalised drama that unfolded for the individual participant (Wittkower, 1978, p.178; Wharton, 2006, p.104). Early-sixteenth-century pilgrims had liberal access to the space and were invited to participate in the procession (Nova, 1995, p.121; Lasansky, 2010). They could move in between the three Magi and their attendants, walk beside and touch their horses, and ultimately, complete the procession through the small door and into the grotto, where the pilgrims were encouraged to not only genuflect and pay homage to the Christ child, but to hold him in their arms, just as a loving mother (Figures 7.5–7.6). In this way, the scene was designed less as a tableau vivant, in which the spectator accessed the figures and scenery as though frozen in space, and more as a space activated by the embodied participation of the pilgrim in four-dimensions (Lasansky, 2010, pp.252–3).

Art historians have justly drawn attention to the 'reality effect' or 'hyperreality' of this and the other multi-media environments at Varallo, a reference to both the life-sized scale and mimetic attention given to the sculptures and their settings (Freedberg, 1989, pp.192–200; Nova, 1995, pp.119–23; Panzanelli, 1999; Wharton, 2006, p.101). Yet the aesthetic quality of the works, in particular their level of verism, was significantly tempered by the original viewing

Figure 7.14: Giovanni Tabacchetti and Giovanni d'Enrico, Detail of Christ's encounter with Veronica, *The Road to Calvary* (in daylight), 1599–1600, Sacro Monte di Varallo. (Photo: Stefan Fritsch)

conditions for the *luoghi sancti*, which were often experienced in the near darkness (Hood, 1985, p.302). Lit by oil torches and lanterns held in the hand and lamps affixed to the wall, individual sculpted and frescoed figures of the environments were highlighted at different moments in the pilgrim's experience and were coordinated with the verbal cues provided by the attendant Franciscan guide. The nighttime viewing conditions encouraged focused attention and heightened sensory awareness, as well as enhanced the somaesthetic drama of preambulation in semi-darkness followed by the encounter with one of the *luoghi sancti* (Hood, 1984, p.300).

The artists who created the various multi-media scenes on the Sacro Monte di Varallo anticipated the impact of lighting on the original viewing conditions for pilgrims. As with later Baroque multi-media environments, Gaudenzio Ferrari and other participating artists at the Sacro Monte di Varallo constructed hidden light sources within the various architectural spaces. Openings in walls and ceilings would have allowed sunlight to stream into the spaces during the daytime open visitation hours; at night, torches would have been used to artificially stream light into the room as well. As seen in the photographs documenting opposing daylight and night conditions in *The Road to Calvary*, the details of the painted backgrounds of the interactive spaces were largely blacked out during these night exercises, save for the crowds of figures pressed against the foreground of the walls (Figures 7.14 and 7.15). The stark contrasts in the painted sky picked up the flickering light of the torches and contributed to the feeling of a spectacular event that unfolded before the very eyes of the pilgrim. In such night conditions, the wall paintings were given atmospheric depth and chiaroscuro through the real-time lighting conditions and those figures pressed to the foreground of the painting appeared as though they had the ability to step forward and into the real space of the pilgrim. In this way, the paintings share affinities with what Otto Demus has called 'icons in space' (Demus, 1976; Pentcheva, 2006, pp.631–55).

Both the lighting and the design of the multi-media spaces drew heightened attention to dual visual modes of artistic realism and artifice, a purposeful aesthetic combination that anticipated the dramatic baroque

Figure 7.15: Giovanni Tabacchetti and Giovanni d'Enrico, Detail of Christ's encounter with Veronica, *The Road to Calvary* (in night lighting), 1599–1600, Sacro Monte di Varallo. (Photo: Stefan Fritsch)

style of Caravaggio and GianLorenzo Bernini. This aesthetic, already found in certain fifteenth-century examples of painting preceding Gaudenzio Ferrari's creations, may arguably be called an early form of 'meraviglia', the artistic principle that later defined Roman and Lombard art of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century (Terry, 2007, pp.38–53). The production of *meraviglia*, or a sense of awe, wonder, or amazement in the spectator, had in large part to do with the ability of the artist to represent the subject visually in a way that both enticed the viewer into a personal relationship with the figure or scene represented through mimetic illusionism and, at the same time, drew attention to the artifice of the work. The aim was to move the viewer by means of the persuasiveness of the craft, yet to do so in such a way as to simultaneously draw attention to the artistic hand that created it. The primary means by which this dual aim was achieved was through the tension between the breathless art forms and the living, sentient body of the pilgrim-viewer.

The mode of viewing inspired by the competing static and dynamic forms within the architectural space, a scene at once activated by the motion of artificial lights and the living, sentient bodies of the pilgrim participants and at the same time emphatically silent and unmoving, was performative. The pilgrim did not view from the outside looking in, as though positioned in front of a painting, but rather was able to participate by physically entering into the scene and becoming part of it. Since the sculptures were created in tandem with, and indeed were designed to interact with, the frescoed onlookers on the walls, the pilgrims were placed in positions to likewise serve as conduits that completed the spatial and psychological connection to the Biblical event.

This mode of active and performative viewing made the distant past accessible not simply through the vivid visual evocation of history, but through the creation of prosthetic memories as well. As Alison Landsberg has discussed, prosthetic memories are intimate, privatised versions of past events that one has not lived through, yet which are formed through first-hand experiences (Landsberg, 2003, pp.144–61; Landsberg, 2004). Prosthetic memories, Landsberg explains, 'are not "authentic" or natural, but rather are derived from engagement with mediated representations … like an artificial limb, these memories are actually worn on the body; these are sensuous memories' (Landsberg, 2003, p.149). In the creation of prosthetic memory, neither a complete nor accurate portrayal of the past is necessary. Rather, most important is the participant's body-mind engagement with scenarios that have the potential to construct an affective relationship to the past event.

The architectural space housing the Holy Sepulchre at Varallo was structured to foster such affective, prosthetic memories through body-mind practices. Finished under Fra Caimi in 1491 as a reproduction of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, the *luogo sancto* strove to improve upon the 'real thing' by providing additional affective scaffolding for the pilgrim through subtle deviations in its architectural form and more explicit deviations in its decoration (Figure 7.8). During the renaissance, pilgrims to the real Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem necessarily spent extended periods of time inside of the church that housed it, since it was customary for the Muslim guards in control of the site to lock pilgrims into the church overnight once they paid their entrance fees (Poggibonsi, [1346–50] 1945, p.16). On certain feasts, pilgrims would be locked into the church for several days at a time. This prolonged visitation often proved to be a distraction from the holy experience as opposed to a benefit, since pilgrims of many different religious persuasions were locked into the relatively small confines of the church at once, including non-believers who set up bazaars on the inside of the locked doors. During their extended stay within the church, pilgrims were assigned to Franciscan guardians who gave them rules of behaviour to follow within the church, including warnings not to shove or push others, deface property, traffic with Eastern merchants, nor waste the evening eating or drinking (Peters, 1985, pp.442–3). That such warnings were given is an indication of the pervasiveness of such conduct. Indeed, travel writers such as Fra Felix Fabri made a point to give detailed accounts of such bad behaviour inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to highlight the difficulties of performing spiritual devotion in the holy city in the late fifteenth century (Fabri, [1480s] 1971, p.106).

The experience at the Holy Sepulchre at the Sacro Monte di Varallo was designed to eliminate such distractions and to highlight the pilgrims' awareness of their somaesthetic engagement with the space in ways that were unavailable to pilgrims to the 'real thing'. As at the real sepulchre in Jerusalem, access to the tomb at Varallo was preceded by two carefully constructed thresholds that were intended to draw attention to the pilgrim's proprioception and a heightened sense of the self in relation to the immediate environs of the *luogo sancto*. The first, accessed from the courtyard plateau representing 'Jerusalem', led the pilgrim into a hemispherical vestibule dedicated to the 'angel of the Lord [who] descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it'

(Matthew 28: 2–3). At Varallo, the 'stone' featured was the miraculous rock found by Caimi's workers when they broke ground for the site. Already within this first space, the atmospheric conditions reflected the site's sacred importance. Windowless and low-vaulted, the vestibule offered a quiet, cool space for the pilgrim to begin his or her focus on Christ's sacrifice (Lasansky, 2010, p.263).

On direct access with the first threshold lay the second, which led to the tomb. An inscription verified that the threshold led to an 'authentic' space that was 'similar' to that of Jerusalem ('SIMILE.E.IL.STO. SEPVLCRO.DE.YV.XPO') (Figure 7.16). As in Jerusalem, access to that space was through a small, shallow door that forced the pilgrim to compress his or her body inward toward itself. In the version at Varallo, the door was even more diminutive, roughly 105 cm or slightly less than three and a half feet high, thus forcing the pilgrim to shuffle through the door with deeply bent knees or even to crawl. The threshold literally brought pilgrim low in a physical manner and in so doing effectively forced the pilgrim into a form of prostration as he or she approached Christ's sepulchre inside the inner chamber. It also created the somaesthetic conditions of *meraviglia*, for once the pilgrim fully crossed over the threshold and was allowed to stand again, he or she immediately was confronted with Christ's battered, lifeless body in the tomb (Figure 7.17).

Veristically carved and painted by Gaudenzio Ferrari in the first decade of the sixteenth century, the wooden sculpture of Christ offered the means to realise the experience of Christ's followers after his body was taken down from the cross and placed in the sepulchre. Unlike the marble slab that covered the interior absence of a body within the tomb in Jerusalem, pilgrims at Varallo's sepulchre were allowed to approach and touch Christ's dead flesh (Hood, 1986, p.301). In the light of a torch at night, the redness of the blood issuing from the wounds on Christ's hands, feet and side signaled areas to touch and behold; his docile face, similarly covered with blood from the violence rendered by the crown of thorns, served as a site for devotional kisses (Figure 7.18). Holes in the hand of the sculpted figure allowed for digital exploration and even penetration of Christ (Figure 7.19). According to Saint Bernard, the crucified body of Christ was an offering to his devotees: 'the head bowed to kiss, the

Figure 7.16: Pilgrim crossing the threshold into the inner sanctum of Holy Sepulchre at Varallo, Sacro Monte di Varallo. (Photo: Stefan Fritsch)

Figure 7.17: Pilgrim entering into the inner sanctum of the Holy Sepulchre at Varallo, architectural space constructed by 1491, wooden figure of the *Dead Christ* by Gaudenzio Ferrari installed in first decade of sixteenth century, Sacro Monte di Varallo (Photo: author)

arms outspread to embrace, the hands pierced to pour out gifts, the feet held fast to remain with us, and the body full extended to spend Himself wholly for us' (de Voragine, [1260] 1969, p.212). Like the Apostle Thomas, who doubted his eyes and needed tactile confirmation of Christ's death and resurrection, so too were the pilgrims allowed access to the physical proof of Christ's bodily suffering (Terry-Fritsch, 2012b, pp.15–37).

One aspect of Gaudenzio Ferrari's sculpture of the *Dead Christ* that largely has been overlooked by art historians is the articulated jointing of the shoulders, which indicate that the sculpture had kinetic potential (Figure 7.18). Other extant sculptures from the original artistic programme of the Sacro Monte di Varallo, such as the apostles surrounding the table at the *Last Supper* (Figure 7.4), also were constructed to facilitate the manipulation of limbs in a variety of poses. The arms of Ferrari's sculpture of the *Dead Christ* in the Holy Sepulchre were able to be moved into alternate positions, including flat beside his body and outstretched as though in an embrace. Such kinetic sculptures were used in Passion Week dramas of the *Depositio Crucis*, which featured wooden sculptures of Christ that were nailed vertically upon a cross and then taken down and placed in a tomb in re-enactment of Christ's death and burial. One can infer from other documented accounts of late medieval and early modern Italian interactions with such hinged Christ sculptures that certain pilgrims may have approached Ferrari's sculpture in intimate ways, including holding his body or even crawling into the tomb for a full-body embrace. By emphasising the human element of Christ's Passion, his literal death as grasped by a mourner at his tomb, the Holy Sepulchre at Varallo incorporated 'praesentia' into the distant and not easily graspable Biblical past (Brown, 1981; Hood, 1984, p.301). Through the simulated presence of the divine, audiences of believers were encouraged to identify with that past, albeit through counterfeit means (Molinari, 1975, p.101; Newbigen, 1990, pp.361–75).

The multi-media environments of Varallo were intended as scenarios for an experiential relationship to Biblical history. Pilgrims were placed within replicated environments from Christ's life and death, and were asked to assume the identity position of Christ, his mother, family, followers or foes. The pilgrim's prosthetic relationship to the Biblical past was contingent on the ability of the artistic programme to index this history and to draw attention to the pilgrim's own sense of himself at the same time. In this way,

Figure 7.18: Detail of the *Dead Christ*, showing moveable shoulder joint, by Gaudenzio Ferrari, first decade of sixteenth century, Holy Sepulchre, Sacro Monte di Varallo. (Photo: Stefan Fritsch)

Figure 7.19: Detail of the hands of the *Dead Christ*, by Gaudenzio Ferrari, first decade of sixteenth century, Holy Sepulchre, Sacro Monte di Varallo. (Photo: Stefan Fritsch)

the pilgrim was both asked to play a role, as though an actor in a drama, and simultaneously was asked to recognise him or herself in the present (Landsberg, 2004, p.135). The pilgrim's somaesthetic interaction within the decorative programme provided the means by which the pilgrim came to identify with scripture or historical time (Rappaport, 1979, pp.173–221; Goffman, 2007, pp.61–5; Hood, 1986, pp.195–206). At the same time, the mindful manipulation of the pilgrim's body functioned as what the performance studies theorist Diana Taylor has called a 'vital act of transfer' (Taylor, 2003, pp.2–3). That is, it transmitted carefully crafted 'social knowledge, memory and a sense of identity through reiterated acts, or what Richard Schechner has called "twice-behaved behavior"' (Taylor, 2003, pp.2-3; Schechner, 1985, p.36).

Pilgrims to Varallo performed devotion through active participation in the *luoghi sancti*. Their actions often mimicked the actions of pilgrims to the real holy land, a strategy to create a somatic memory of the Varallo pilgrimage that was comparable to the real thing. In certain cases of simulated relics at Varallo, such as the impression of Christ's footsteps in the Chapel of the Ascension, the act of touching replicated relics was rewarded with plenary indulgences, just as in the real Holy Land (Nova, 1995, p.124). In addition, however, pilgrims to Varallo were offered a performative space to build further somatic memories that were unavailable to pilgrims to the real Holy Land. Through active immersion in the painted and sculpted environments of the Sacro Monte di Varallo, pilgrims were enticed to personalise the sacred scenes and to build prosthetic memories. The vivid illusionism of the sculpted figures, witnessed in the flickering light of torches against the evening darkness, provided a focus for their mindful prayers as well as a means to physically connect with sacred history. The artistic programme was designed to offer pilgrims the opportunity to experience a heightened somaesthetic encounter with the divine in a way that was different from, and perhaps better than, the real thing.

## Conclusion

The framework of somaesthetics has been used throughout this essay to examine the strategies of the Franciscan founders of the Sacro Monte di Varallo and the corresponding tactics of late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth-century pilgrims of the Holy Land experience. Franciscan friars, beginning with Fra Caimi in the last quarter of the fifteenth century, purposefully designed the architectural and decorative programme as a strategy to substitute a site that possessed neither real things nor real places for the Holy Land. By drawing attention to the ways in which the holy mountain relied on pilgrims' body-mindfulness in order to fulfill its promise as a sacred pilgrimage site, this essay analysed some of the tactics of early pilgrims and offered an explanation of the powerful affective bonds that were produced between the landscape, the works of art and the pilgrim-audience. The architectural and decorative programme at Varallo created a frame for pilgrims to act out sacred history; they assumed a prosthetic relationship to this history through their body-mind engagement.

Furthermore, by considering the historical experience of the site, this essay has provided an alternative explanation for artistic style at Varallo, which, as argued here, must be understood through the somaesthetics of the artistic programme's original viewers. The pilgrims to the site were asked to perform body-mindfulness to not only activate the multi-media scenes, but to complete them as well. Such performative engagement with the sacred histories at Varallo fostered the production of authentic emotions and memories of past events. These affective experiences were then authenticated by the Franciscans at the site, who affirmed Varallo's holy connections to Jerusalem and to God himself. The opportunity for such first-hand engagement also provided a key means by which the Sacro Monte di Varallo staged its own success as a pilgrimage site. The active participation in both the prayer practices and the Franciscan touching exercises also brought promise of eternal salvation. Given such a powerful mode of communicating God's grace, it is hardly surprising that, when the Roman Church faced the challenge of the Protestant movement, it turned to the style of *meraviglia* at the Sacro Monte di Varallo to convey its message and developed and promoted new strategies for pious and personalised interaction with the sacred mysteries based on practices at the holy mountain.

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