

THESIS ABSTRACTS

“MORE CATHOLIC THAN ROME:
ART AND LAY SPIRITUALITY AT VENICE’S SCUOLA DI S. FANTIN,
1562–1605”

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This dissertation explores the art patronage of a small group of devout Venetian laymen across five decades up to the papal Interdict of Venice in 1606–1607. It takes a new approach to, and offers new perspectives on, this crucial but largely neglected moment in the city’s cultural history. Authorized by the state to provide spiritual comfort and assistance to prisoners condemned to death, the Scuola di S. Fantin played a pivotal role in both the city’s religious life and its criminal justice system. Public execution was a highly choreographed rite with profound political and theological meaning. By repositioning the brutal rite of punishment within the context of Christian forgiveness, charity, and salvation, the Scuola sought to turn a spectacle of violence into an opportunity for spiritual transformation for its members, the condemned, and the broader community.

The confraternity’s meeting house was built and decorated between 1562 and 1605, a period marked by increasing antagonism between the Venetian Republic and the Papacy, and by the ongoing struggle between Catholic orthodoxy and Protestant theology. This study employs the methodologies of art history, ritual studies, anthropology, and cultural history to offer a multifaceted case study on Venetian art, ritual, and devotion. The themes and issues analyzed include: the interplay between local visual traditions, lay devotional practices, and the new aesthetic and doctrinal demands of the Catholic Reformation; the artistic expression of Catholic orthodoxy in a city at odds with the Roman Church; the defense of contested religious doctrines (especially Purgatory and Indulgences) in treatises and in the visual arts; and the use of images to ease the tension between state-sanctioned violence and the moral imperatives of Christianity.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the Scuola and its history, focusing in particular on its role as a comforting confraternity dedicated to assisting the condemned. I also discuss early modern treatises on the theory and practice of consoling the condemned that contribute to our understanding of the Scuola and its goals. Chapter 2 focuses on the architecture of the Scuola’s meeting house; I reconsider the evidence for attributing the building to Alessandro Vittoria, and discuss the iconography of the façade and its significance in the history of Venetian architecture. Chapters 3 and 4 explain the decorative programs of the Scuola’s two main rooms up to the period of

the Interdict. Both rooms are reconstructed based on a variety of sources, including contemporary descriptions, the existing architectural setting, and comparison with similar rooms at other confraternities. Chapter 3 also closely examines one component of the program of the upper hall, Palma il Giovane's St. Jerome Cycle, in light of the Venetian confraternal tradition and Counter-Reformation art theory. The second part of Chapter 4 focuses attention on Palma's Purgatory Cycle, its textual sources, and its relationship to political discourse and confraternal piety in the decade preceding the Interdict. Ultimately, this dissertation shows how the members of one confraternity used art and ritual to present themselves and their city as embodiments of orthodox Catholicism, civic piety, and patriotism in a period fraught with religious and political conflict.