

RECENT THESES

ALYSSA A. ABRAHAM

THE RECEPTION OF CORREGGIO'S TWO ALTARPIECES FOR MODENA IN THEIR CONFRATERNITY SETTINGS

PH.D. THESIS, QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY, KINGSTON, ONTARIO
THESIS DIRECTOR: CATHLEEN HOENIGER
DEFENDED: 8 MARCH 2017

Abstract

This dissertation explores the ways in which Correggio's two altarpieces for Modena, the *Madonna di San Sebastiano* (c. 1524) and the *Madonna di San Giorgio* (c. 1530), were received in their confraternity settings. Altarpieces for confraternities were frequently designed to communicate the corporate identity of the societies for which they had been commissioned and to support the devotional exercises of the brothers. However, many such works of religious painting were removed from their settings by private collectors in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; altarpieces were thus stripped of their primary function. As a result, art historical scholarship has focused largely on their secondary—secular—reception. The dissertation, therefore, repositions the two Modenese altarpieces by Antonio Allegri da Correggio within their early religious contexts and provides insight into the reception and use of religious paintings by confraternity members, especially in the context of their ordinary and extra-ordinary devotional rituals. Furthermore, because the function and appearance of each altarpiece is so closely tied to the identity and devotional aims of the confraternity for which it was commissioned, the thesis also provides new information on the history of the confraternities of San Sebastiano and San Pietro Martire in Modena.

The introductory chapter considers the historiography of Correggio's two altarpieces for Modena and discusses recent approaches to the reception of his work. Then, each altarpiece is examined as a separate case study, beginning with an investigation of the history of the confraternity that commissioned it and then moving on to an analysis of the altarpiece and its setting. The second chapter thus presents the *Madonna di San Sebastiano* as a plague image that was designed for the Confraternita di San Sebastiano, which was founded in 1501 after a terrible plague swept through Modena. Chapter three considers the history and most likely appearance of the oratory in which the *San Sebastiano Altarpiece* was displayed in order to shed light on the ways in which the painting functioned to promote the corporate identity and devotional focus of the company.

Chapter four completes the study of the *Madonna di San Sebastiano* by examining the public reception of the altarpiece, especially leading up to its acquisition by Duke Francesco I d'Este of Modena sometime before 1657.

The fifth chapter introduces the *Madonna di San Giorgio* and the history of the Confraternita di San Pietro Martire, which was founded in 1261 after the Flagellant Movement of the previous year. During the first three centuries, members of the confraternity were well-respected for their work in Modena's hospitals, but in 1542 they were forced to abandon their curative mission when the city's *opere pie* were consolidated into the *Santa Unione*. No longer permitted to work as *ospedalieri*, the confratelli began to focus on the construction of elaborate devotional displays, most of which featured Correggio's *San Giorgio Altarpiece*. Using highly-detailed descriptions recorded in the confraternity's chronicle, the *Libro delle congregazioni che incomincia dal 1537 sino al 1603*, chapter six reconstructs a series of *Quarant'ore* celebrations (referred to as *rappresentazioni*) held in honour of the plenary indulgence issued to the brotherhood by Pope Gregory XIII in 1577. The distinctive nature of each event suggests that the confratelli annually reconsidered the function of the painting according to their immediate spiritual goals. Chapter seven offers an examination of sixteenth-century chronicle entries and correspondence that reveal the ways in which the brothers of San Pietro Martire reacted to several requests to copy their beloved altarpiece and how they obsessed over its safety. Finally, seventeenth-century documents provide an intimate account of how the confratelli responded to the absence of the *Madonna di San Giorgio* after Duke Francesco I d'Este purchased it in 1649.

The thesis concludes with a comparison of the reception of each altarpiece in its confraternity setting, in light of the availability of primary source materials. The appendices contain transcriptions of archival documents here presented for the first time.

Biographical note

Alyssa A. Abraham earned her M.A. in Art History at the University of Florida in May 2012 and began her Ph.D. studies at Queen's University that September as an Ontario Trillium Scholar. Her research interests include the reception and function of religious paintings in Italy, the duplication or replacement of altarpieces as a collecting practice, devotional experiences in confraternities during the sixteenth century, and the digital reconstruction of ephemeral devotional displays staged by Italian confraternities.