

Re-viewing the Image of Confraternities in Renaissance Visual Culture¹

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Central to current art historical studies of Renaissance visual culture is group patronage – government, family, church, the religious orders. Confraternal patronage is by far the newest among them. For decades, historians of confraternities have investigated a wide range of social and religious issues and created new paradigms of research. By contrast, art historians have only recently begun to probe the crucial significance of confraternities as lay corporate patrons within the religious, civic, and cultural matrix of urban centres.

Pioneering works, of course, exist. Marilyn Lavin's still exemplary analysis (1967) of the monumental altarpiece by Joos van Ghent and *predella* panels by Paolo Uccello for the Compagnia di Corpus Domini of Urbino demonstrated how a confraternal devotional image could have broad civic implications. Rab Hatfield's groundbreaking study (1970) of the Compagnia de' Magi in Florence led to consideration of the influences of confraternal membership on subject matter in the private sphere. In the 1980s, Jean Weisz related the comforting rituals of the *confratelli* of S. Giovanni Decollato of Rome to their oratory decoration. David Rosand's studies of Titian and Tintoretto set the stage for rich scholarship on the intricacies of patronage by the Venetian *scuole*. Art historian Peter Humphrey and social historian Richard MacKenney integrated diverse disciplinary methodologies to expand knowledge of Venetian confraternal patronage and experience. Influenced by sociological and anthropological models of ritual and theater, Patricia Fortini Brown's magisterial work on the "eyewitness style" contributed new dynamic approaches to the visual culture of Venetian confraternities. Historian James Banker brought his consummate knowledge of confraternities in Sansepolcro to bear on interpreting Piero della Francesca's famous polyptych for the Misericordia. This is to mention only a few earlier, groundbreaking contextual studies.

The study of confraternal patronage of the arts has a far longer tradition in Italy. Among important Italian contributions are the archival documentation and registering of confraternal furnishings and devotional objects under the auspices of Ludovica Sebreghondi in Florence. The multi-volume works edited by Liana

1 This presentation was delivered at the Special Trends Panel on "Recent Trends in Confraternity Studies" at the Renaissance Society of America meetings held in Toronto on 29 March 2003. A more extensive and fully annotated version of this talk will be published in a forthcoming volume to be edited by Christopher Black.

Bertoldi Lenoci on the confraternities of Puglia have devoted a number of articles to diverse aspects of confraternal patronage of the arts. Yet anglophone art historical scholarship, as I see it, is distinct. It is developing more interdisciplinary and theoretical approaches to visual culture in order to identify multivalent relationships between the arts, ritualized behaviours, and the civic setting. To demonstrate how new these approaches are, only a decade ago, Diane Cole Ahl and I organized the first session on Italian confraternities and the visual arts at the College Art Association. Then in 2000, we edited the first book in English to focus solely on the roles of Italian confraternities in the patronage of art. We invited distinguished scholars from diverse fields – three of whom are on this panel – following the path marked out by Konrad Eisenbichler in *Crossing the Boundaries* (1991). We kept an eye on the prize – the visual arts. Visual media were key methods of communication in a still predominantly oral culture. Each essay demonstrates how *confratelli* and *consorelle* were active agents in discourses that shaped spiritual reality and material culture.

The subtitle to the volume – *Ritual, Spectacle, Image* – sets forth the basic premise that I will also address here: Confraternal patronage must be studied by reintegrating works of art into the rich cultural and social contexts from which they emerged, using ritual and spectacle as crucial interpretative strategies. Although the book focuses on Italian sodalities, I believe that the premise applies equally to the North, Spain, and the New World, where art historians are only beginning to attend to the significance of confraternities. Last year at this conference, Jeffrey Chipps Smith bemoaned the fact that “art historians have paid less attention to confraternities in Northern Europe” than in Italy and Spain.

In response to the theme of this panel, I would like to set out some critical themes and propose new tasks for art historians by selecting issues raised in scholarship over the past five years. These include: confraternal membership by artists and concomitant patronage networks; custodial care of miracle-working images; confraternities and material culture, or what might be called the economics of piety; innovations in iconography and style; the promulgation of new cults; and, finally, reconfiguring urban space.

Let us begin with membership. It needs to be stated at the outset that practically every artist and artisan was a member of at least one confraternity, as was true of adult males across Europe. Not only did artists belong to confraternities associated with their diverse guilds, but they were usually members of additional sodalities, as was typical. Piero della Francesca’s family were long-standing members of the Misericordia; it is likely that he was too. Artists who directed successful workshops often held prominent positions, from accountants to leading officials, such as Neri di Bicci in Florence and Antoniazio Romano in Rome. The Ghirlandaio family, for example, traditionally belonged to the prestigious *disciplinati* company of San Paolo. In her monograph on the artist (2000), Jean Cadogan has demonstrated how Domenico Ghirlandaio’s enrollment at the

age of twenty-one and his regular attendance, most importantly at the Saturday night flagellation ritual, confirms the validity of patterns identified by Ronald Weissman in his groundbreaking *Ritual Brotherhood in Renaissance Florence* (1982): men joined and were most active while establishing themselves professionally and personally.

How patronage networks emerged from confraternal membership, a fact not at all surprising from a confraternal perspective, still needs to be consistently integrated in art historical studies. Artists often joined the sort of confraternity for which they worked. Andrea del Sarto first enrolled in the confraternity of San Bastiano upon the urging of friends who wanted him to paint a picture of the saint. He then became a member of the *disciplinati* company called the Scalzo, for whom he painted the famous monochrome cycle of the life of St. John the Baptist over the course of fifteen years. Andrea was buried in their tomb, as was also typical. The Renaissance Society of America has awarded a 2003 Research Grant to Douglas Dow to investigate these splendid frescoes, and we look forward to the results. Artists were intimately aware of, and often directly involved in, the devotional experience of their work.

Understanding the implications of confraternal membership can further lead to significant reassessment of individual artists. The literature has too often created a sensational Hieronymous Bosch who supposedly conjured paintings along the evil axis of heresy and alchemy. Laurinda Dixon, in a paper presented last year at this conference and now in a Phaidon monograph on the artist, rejects such misinterpretations of his life and work by focusing on Bosch's dedicated participation in the prestigious Brotherhood of Our Lady. In addition to its meeting house in 's-Hertogenbosch, the Brotherhood owned a splendid chapel in the church of St. Jan (later the cathedral). The chapel was entirely rebuilt during Bosch's lifetime. The confraternity numbered thousands of members across the continent, presented a spectacular annual procession honoring the Virgin in which the whole city participated, dispensed bread and clothing to the poor, and claimed more papal indulgences than any other sodality in Northern Europe. Most incredibly, the Brotherhood itself has been misconstrued by art historians as a heretical sect. Bosch became a "sworn member" in 1488, one of a select group of about fifty men who formed a kind of "steering committee." In fact, confraternal records and civic tax rolls are the only written sources we have to document Bosch's life, indicating a wealth of untapped resources. And, of course, membership had its privileges, providing him with opportunities for patronage at all levels – the confraternity itself, though these works are no longer extant; civic and private; ecclesiastical, bourgeois, and aristocratic. Art historians are challenged to reexamine the meanings of confraternal membership and patronage.

Let us take another Northern example. Petrus Christus belonged to two important confraternities in Bruges: Our Lady of the Snow, which eventually buried him in their church in late 1475 or early 1476, and Our Lady of the Dry

Tree. The source for the unusual iconography of Christus's famous small panel depicting Mary and the Christ Child standing amidst the thorny branches of a tree, usually dated in the 1460s, has been clarified by Hugo van der Velden (1997). Although generally accepted as representing a metaphorical reference to the Immaculate Conception or the fourteenth-century text of the *Pilgrimage of the Soul*, it actually derived, van der Velden argues, from a miracle-working image in Bruges around which the eponymous confraternity was founded before 1396. The painting seems likely to have been commissioned by one of the members. The very name of the confraternity – which Paul Trio discussed in a paper delivered at the 2003 meetings of the RSA by asking “What’s in a name?” – provides the key to the cultic focus and, thereby, to the iconography.

Confraternal mediation of the public cult of miraculous images is another area deserving attention. The considerable monies donated by the devout to confraternal caretakers were crucial for the physical upkeep of the shrine, the image's dramatic display, and, in turn, the distribution of alms. As John Henderson and Diane Zervas have elucidated, at Orsanmichele in Florence the sale of candles and oblations provided the principal sources of income in the 1320s. On a single feast day, it was recorded, 4,000 candles were sold and burned. The animated, shimmering space must have created an environment fraught with the potential for miracles. The status of a confraternity in both the celestial and terrestrial spheres grew in direct proportion to the charisma and fame of its image – truly, a holy asset.

New studies on the value and values of material culture could also be widened by considering confraternal patronage and consumption of goods. Confraternal inventories, virtually unexplored, reveal a plethora of artifacts of devotion and commemoration that can no longer be traced, indicating how spare is our knowledge of the visual culture. Second-hand objects, too, were used and reconfigured. The few inventories that have been published and analyzed by scholars, among them Kathleen Giles Arthur, Konrad Eisenbichler, Ann Matchette, and Ludovica Sebreghondi, afford reconstructions of rich devotional spaces that often rivaled private undertakings. And let us consider a most characteristic object associated with confraternities – the *gonfalone*, the great processional banner after which so many companies took their name. The term actually applied to a whole range of objects and included paintings on panel as well as on canvas. The development of canvas painting, both in the North and the South, was advanced in large measure by the ubiquity of confraternal banners. Documentary evidence repeatedly points to workshops of the most prominent painters, not just “minor artists,” who produced them. Moreover, the agency of *gonfaloni* was not static – inert when kept in storage, but potentially activated in the street or above the altar. We need to look beyond a specific, single function of such artifacts to broaden our understanding of the power of images, especially when miraculous efficacy transformed them into venerated cult objects.

Another theme to explore is how confraternities influenced iconographic and stylistic innovations. Research on sixteenth-century Italian painting has begun to address this subject. David Franklin has posited (1994) that Rosso Fiorentino produced his most original images for confraternities in such provincial towns as Volterra, Sansepolcro, Città di Castello, and Arezzo. The Volterra *Deposition from the Cross* (1519–21) reflected recent confraternal reforms and new ritual celebrations inspired by the acquisition of a relic of the True Cross. Other examples of this phenomenon are Correggio's mature altarpieces, executed in the 1520s for Modenese sodalities. David Ekserdjian (1997) has argued that the distinctive styles of the *Madonna of Saint Sebastian* (for the eponymous confraternity) and the *Madonna of Saint George* (for the confraternity of St. Peter Martyr) responded to the particular devotions of each institution. A further task is to contextualize confraternal altarpieces and rituals in their original environments of chapel, church, hospital, and street by careful reconstructions of the spaces on which so much planning and resources were invested.

Other avenues of investigation are new devotions. Even when propagated by individual religious orders, new cults were promulgated to the laity predominantly through confraternities and their artistic commissions. The veneration of St. Joseph, following the institution of his feast in 1481, is a case in point, as Carolyn Wilson has recently documented (2001). For example, Pietro Perugino's famous altarpiece of the *Marriage of the Virgin* in the chapel dedicated to St. Joseph in the Cathedral of Perugia was commissioned in 1499 by the eponymous confraternity, established little more than a decade earlier. The images in confraternity chapels most potently reified the new cult and, as visual texts, kept liturgy and ritual in the mind's eye.

The new devotion of the rosary and the rosary confraternities follow a similar pattern, as Anne Winston-Allen has so cogently described for Germany and Esparanza Camara confirmed for Italy: Visual media played an essential role. Although only one among eight different methods of reciting the devotion, the picture rosary – devoid of written gloss – soon became the version of choice and continued through the sixteenth century. So that no one would leave home without it, broadsides advertised 10,000-year indulgences to confraternity members for simply wearing or carrying a string of rosary beads. Albrecht Dürer's famous painting of the *Celebration of the Rosary*, completed in 1506, was commissioned by the German Confraternity of the Rosary in Venice. It is closely modeled on a woodcut that first appeared in German confraternal statutes of 1476. The critical role of cheap prints, broadsides, and early books produced by confraternities within the new print culture awaits fuller investigation.

The ways in which confraternities reconfigured urban centres must also be explored. Scholars have begun to investigate the physical and economic presence of confraternities in the spatial and festal reordering of cities. The prominent new site across from the Florentine Baptistery acquired in 1321 by the Compagnia di

Santa Maria della Misericordia (later known as the Bigallo) indicated the pivotal role that the charitable confraternity had come to play, as William Levin and Phillip Earenfight have most recently demonstrated. Nicholas Terpstra continues to explore such architectural ramifications in Bologna.

In terms of real estate, few confraternities were simply the physical space of a chapel. Sodalities owned, rebuilt, and decorated churches, chapels, hospitals, shelters, and orphanages in all parts of a city and beyond the city walls. Detailed portfolios of houses and shops, gardens and vineyards served to finance the enduring works of art and ephemeral acts of devotion commissioned year after year. Each property was identified by a plaque that stamped the confraternity's presence throughout the city. For example, the insignia of the Roman confraternity of *Raccomandati del SS. Salvatore ad Sanctorum* derived from the icon of Christ, believed to have been "painted without hands," in the *Sancta Sanctorum*, the private papal chapel at the Lateran. During the fifteenth century, the confraternity gained full custodial rights (and the financial emoluments) to the famous miracle-working image. The vast landholdings of the confraternity included half of the Colosseum, most of the Via Maggiore, the route of the papal *possesso* (coronation procession), as well as its central philanthropic enterprise, the hospital that still functions today. Computerized layering of confraternal property ownership over time is a *desideratum* that would demand the collaboration of many scholars and serve all in mapping urban development.

The boundaries of a confraternity were permeable, its ritual geography a product of urban process and change. A dramatic, final example is the small church of S. Maria Annunziata outside the city walls, owned by the Roman confraternity of the Gonfalone. During the fifteenth and most of the sixteenth centuries, the main celebration was a festive pilgrimage on 1 May that culminated in a charitable distribution of bread. By the late sixteenth century, the Annunziata was newly designated one of the nine principal basilicas for earning the Holy Year indulgence, the only major pilgrimage church in Rome with a confraternal provenance.

As recent scholarship has made clear – aided by splendid conservation campaigns – the exponential growth of sodalities in early modern society gave them ever greater agency in shaping visual and devotional culture. In every instance, I suggest, works of art commissioned and maintained by confraternities need to be considered in light of cult, ceremony, and performance. I see some of the scholarly tasks as follows:

1. We need to explore the implications of membership for the artists themselves as well as for the patronage networks that evolved.
2. New approaches to the rubric "confraternal patronage" are necessary. Simply documenting the name of a confraternal patron is no longer sufficient. Nor is confraternal patronage mere "historical background," described as if located

outside the work and too often isolated, then forgotten in an introductory chapter of a book. Understanding confraternal patronage requires an exploration of the dynamic relationships between art and devotional activities.

3. We need to reassess the role of confraternities in the “economics of piety” and attend to the broad spectrum of works commissioned and purchased.
4. New iconography and new aesthetic criteria introduced by confraternities are additional areas that require study. Confraternities were crucial in promulgating new cults, and the art they commissioned directly effected the “image” of new devotions.
5. Confraternities were not just patrons of “new” art, but served as custodians of precious miracle-working images, staging devotion in both permanent and ephemeral displays and inspiring generous donations. The ramifications of confraternal stewardship of miraculous images – for piety and philanthropy – need to be further explored.
6. Confraternities were instrumental in reconfiguring urban space. From the buildings they financed to the new sacred topographies they inscribed on older matrices, art historians need to incorporate sodalities and their rituals in studies of architectural form and social space.

In conclusion, through interdisciplinary perspectives and collaborative dialogue, art historians will create ever more nuanced narratives that integrate dynamic images of confraternities and their complex roles in artistic production and visual culture.

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