**Title**

Image as Relic: Bodily Vision and the Reconstitution of Viewer/Image Relationships at the Sacro Monte di Varallo

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# Image as Relic: Bodily Vision and the Reconstitution of Viewer/Image Relationships at the Sacro Monte di Varallo

**Margaret F. Bell**

"Without a doubt, I have never seen anything more religious, more pious, that more touched our hearts […] and I, having recorded everything three, four times and then again [could] not put an end to either my visit or my wonder."[1] These are the words of humanist Girolamo Morone, who wrote to a friend from the Sacro Monte di Varallo in 1507. The Sacro Monte, established by Franciscan friar Bernardino Caimi in 1486, was designed to be a topographically mimetic reconstruction of the Holy Land in the foothills of the Alps northwest of Milan. The complex, consisting of recreated sites like Mount Calvary and the Holy Sepulcher, was intended for pilgrims unable to make the much longer and more hazardous trip to Jerusalem itself. As Girolamo's words indicate, the Sacro Monte presents challenges for those attempting to describe the complicated and emotionally provocative site. Though he records what he witnessed "three, four times and then again," it is not enough to convey what he saw and felt while walking through the simulated *loci sacri*. In the early sixteenth century, the experience of the recreated Holy Land became increasingly immersive as life-size terracotta and wooden figures representing biblical figures were added to the sacred sites. The figures vivified the represented religious scenes, not only because they were situated in a New Jerusalem, but also because of the remarkable fact that visitors to Varallo could move among and touch them as if they were living beings.

What follows is a focused discussion of the experience of the sacred at the Sacro Monte in the sixteenth century; an investigation of the sometimes powerfully indescribable dynamics that occur between visual representations of the divine and the faithful viewer. This article will delve into a particular moment in the evolution of the relationship between viewers and images at the Sacro Monte di Varallo, when, in the mid-sixteenth century, sweeping changes to the site prevented viewers from physically interacting with the wood and terracotta figures populating the biblical scenes. This drastic change to the viewer's experience was due to the installation of floor-to-ceiling glass screens called *vetriate* designed by Milanese architect Galeazzo Alessi between 1565 and 1569, just after the Council of Trent. These dates have led scholars to conclude that the *vetriate* were designed to inhibit the idolatrous potential of the Sacro Monte's sculptural groups of holy personages in response to the Tridentine rulings on the proper use of religious images, during an era when ecclesiastical authorities called for a rigorous delineation between the sacred and profane. However, the impact of the glass screens on the viewer's perception of these polychrome *sacre rappresentazioni* deserves additional analysis. Although the screens likely served a disciplinary purpose, I will argue that the *vetriate*, by virtue of their construction and decoration, would have also signaled to the viewer the importance, even preciousness, of the material tableaux. The mimetic qualities of the Sacro Monte, as well as contemporary literature that addressed reliquaries and the partitioning of ecclesiastical space, support the idea that the *vetriate* enhanced rather than diminished the physical significance of the tableaux and their role as relic-like links between the viewer and the life of Christ.[2]

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[1] Roberta Panzanelli, "Pilgrimages in Hyperreality: Images and Imagination in the Early Phase of the 'New Jerusalem' at Varallo (1486-1530)," PhD diss. (UCLA 1999), 137.

[2] I would like to express my gratitude to the anonymous reviewers of this essay for *California Italian Studies* for their generous and thought-provoking comments.

**Viewer/image relationships at the Sacro Monte di Varallo before Alessi**

Two legends offer explanations as to why Caimi chose the foothills above the small northern Italian town of Varallo as the location of his new Holy Land. In the first, Caimi saw in a dream that the topographical arrangement of Varallo's landscape was strikingly similar to the Holy Land, complete with a new Golgotha and River Jordan. In the second, Caimi was drawn to the hillside during a morning stroll by the sound of a singing bird, immediately ending his search for the ideal location for a pilgrimage site analogous to the Holy Land itself.[3] In either case, the story of the Sacro Monte begins with an auspicious sign.

A plaque in front of the chapel of the recreated Holy Sepulcher makes the Sacro Monte's purpose clear: "The Milanese friar Bernardino Caimi envisioned the sacred places of this mountain so that those who could not make the pilgrimage could see Jerusalem right here."[4] In its initial phase, the layout of Varallo was based on measurements taken by Caimi when he was in Palestine. Medieval and early modern pilgrims to the Holy Land frequently recorded distances between significant locations in the narrative of Christ's life.[5] For example, the twelfth-century pilgrim Peter the Deacon reported detailed measurements of structures and distances in his *Book of Holy Places* in order to reconstruct the spatial relationships among the sacred monuments in the mind of the reader.[6] Caimi used his own careful measurements of the distances between sacred sites, which he made while serving as the provisional guardian of the Franciscan-controlled locations in Jerusalem, to establish a topomimetic landscape at Varallo that imitated some of the Holy Land's topography.[7] Chapels nestled into the landscape marked simulated sacred sites such as Mount Tabor, Mount Calvary, Mount Zion and the Holy Sepulcher. In the early stages of development of the Sacro Monte, these chapels functioned as place-holders where pilgrims would stop to meditate upon the events that had occurred at each site's counterpart in the Holy Land. From the beginning, the represented *loci sacri*, marked by the chapels*,* were called "mysteries" (*misteri*), a term used to refer to certain events in the life of Christ, usually considered in relation to one another as part of some devotional sequence, as in the rosary.[8]

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[3] Panzanelli, "Pilgrimages in Hyperreality," 110.

[4] Ibid., 11.

[5] Nicole Chareyron, *Pilgrims to Jerusalem in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 83.

[6] "To the east, below Mount Calvary, is the Temple of the Lord, in another part of the city, which was built by Solomon. It has four doors, the first open on the east, the second on the west, the third on the south and the fourth on the north, which signify the four quarters of the world, and outside it has eight corners, each one turning a corner of twelve paces […] In Anathoth is the tower where the prophet Jeremiah uttered his Lamentations. It is four miles from Jerusalem. Twelve miles from Jerusalem is the tomb of the holy prophet Amos, at the place called Tekoa." Peter the Deacon, "Book of Holy Places" [compiled 1137], translated in John Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1971), 93.

[7] For further discussion of topomimesis at Varallo, see Panzanelli, "Pilgrimages in Hyperreality," 119-128, and David Leatherbarrow, "The Image and Its Setting: A Study of the Sacro Monte at Varallo," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 14 (1987): 107-22.

[8] These sites are explicitly called Misteri in the 1514 guidebook entitled *Questi sono li misteri che sono sopra el Monte de Varalle*, originally published in Milan by a publishing house owned by the da Ponte (or Ponzio) family. For a facsimile, see *Questi sono li Misteri che sono sopra el Monte de Varalle, in una "Guida" poetica del 1514*, ed. Stefania Stefani Perrone (Varallo: Società per la conservazione delle opere d'arte e dei monumenti in Valsesia, 1987).
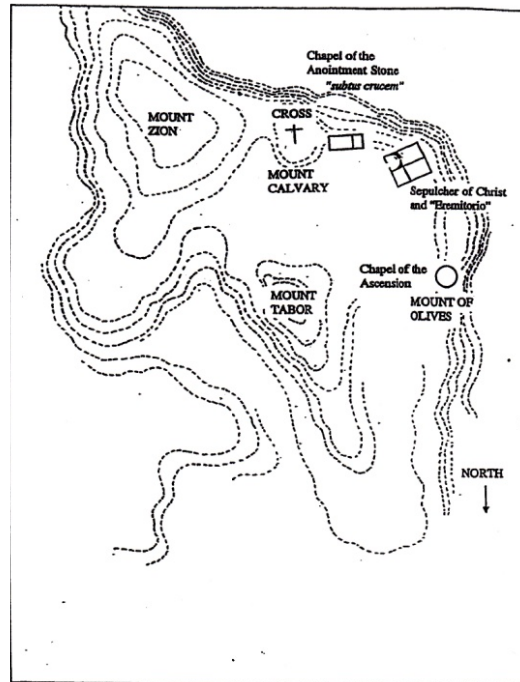
Map based on the 1493 papal act of donation[9]

The topographical map based on the 1493 papal act of donation suggests that the represented sacred mountains were arranged based on natural rises in the Varallese landscape. A visitor's sense of performing a pilgrimage would undoubtedly have been enhanced through the physical exertion of walking up the slope of the Sacro Monte's rendition of Mount Tabor or the recreated Via Dolorosa, which until the sixteenth century was the primary route from the town of Varallo to the Sacro Monte. The pilgrim's experience of moving towards or through a place was integral to the pilgrimage process, and for many centuries travelers to the actual Holy Land not only recorded numerical distances in their accounts, but also wrote of the exhausting effects of the muscular strain required to ascend the Via Dolorosa or to move through the treacherous and demanding desert. Egeria, one of the earliest known pilgrims to Jerusalem, described the physical aspect of her journey to Mount Sinai in these terms: "[The mountains] are hard to climb. You do not go round and round them, spiraling up gently, but straight at each one as if you were going up a wall, and then straight down to the foot, till you reach the foot of the central mountain, Sinai itself."[10] These sorts of pilgrimage accounts, which circulated widely in the late medieval and early modern periods, attempted to recreate for the reader the physical intensity of traveling in the Holy Land.[11]  Varallo makes this intensity more bodily and immediately accessible through a recreated pilgrimage landscape that is at once virtual and physically real. In addition, some scholars suggest that in the interest of reproducing the pilgrimage process as closely as possible, the Franciscan caretakers of the Sacro Monte provided tours of the sacred

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[9]  Map from Panzanelli, "Pilgrimages in Hyperreality," 247.

[10] Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels*, 93.

[11] Kathryn M. Rudy, *Virtual Pilgrimages in the Convent: Imagining Jerusalem in the Late Middle Ages* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 19. See also Diana Webb, *Medieval Pilgrimage c. 700-c. 1500* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

sites just as their counterparts did in Palestine.[12] As in the actual Holy Land, pilgrims to Varallo would not necessarily have encountered the recreated sacred sites in the order in which they appear in the Christological narrative.

The sacrality of Varallo developed not only through the mimetic reference to the Holy Land's topography, but also through the formal elements of certain recreated sacred places, specifically the Holy Sepulcher and the Nativity Grotto.[13] Various accounts of the Sacro Monte emphasize the similarity of these locations to the originals in order to underscore the sacred nature of Varallo. For example, as the site for the chapel of the Holy Sepulcher was being excavated in 1491, builders allegedly unearthed a rock that was the exact shape and size of the boulder covering the entrance to Christ's tomb.[14] The discovery was interpreted as a sign from God that legitimized the selection of the chapel's location. It is not surprising that the dimensions of the discovered boulder were considered noteworthy, since pilgrims to the Holy Land often took measurements of relics, or *mensurae*, using a ruler or in some cases pieces of twine, which were believed to have healing and protective properties if worn on the body.[15] Caimi's later acquisition of a cast of the Sacra Orma, or Christ's footprint left behind after the Ascension, further illustrates the sacrality attached to replicas corresponding to the dimensions of the prototype. Touching the Sacra Orma (currently fixed to the wall of the Sacro Monte's basilica to the right of the main altar) became such an integral part of the pilgrimage to Varallo that the footprint received a papal indulgence in 1488.[16] In addition to the indulgence and the fortuitously shaped boulder, early accounts of divine intervention at Varallo, such as the miraculous healing of a noblewoman in the chapel of the Annunciation in 1498, indicate that it quickly acquired the devotional weight of an established pilgrimage site.[17]

The Holy Land experience at Varallo became all the more immersive when, towards the end of the fifteenth century, Caimi and his successors began filling the chapels with life-size tableaux representing biblical scenes. In northern Italy, there already existed a tradition of life-size figures used to evoke powerful emotions in the viewers, such as Niccolò dell'Arca's mid-fifteenth- century *Lamentation* scene in the Sanctuary of Santa Maria della Vita in Bologna, in which the terracotta figures of mourners surrounding the dead Christ demonstrate various dramatic gestures of grieving. Similarly, at Varallo, visitors no longer needed solely to imagine what had occurred at the simulated biblical locations; for now they could see the events staged before their eyes. One of earliest extant sculptural groups, currently on display at the Pinacoteca di Varallo, is that of the *Pietra dell'Unzione*, created between 1493 and 1507.[18] It is different

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[12] Panzanelli, "Pilgimages in Hyperreality," 141. See also D. Medina Lasansky, "Body Elision: Acting Out the Passions at the Italian Sacri Monti," in *The Body in Early Modern Italy*, ed. Julia L. Hairston and Walter Stephens (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 249-273, and Alessandro Nova, "'Popular' Art in Renaissance Italy: Early Response to the Holy Mountain at Varallo," in *Reframing the Renaissance*, ed. Claire Farago (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 113-126.

[13] Panzanelli, "Pilgimages in Hyperreality," 121.

[14] Stefania Stefani Perrone, "Li capituli de Passione fundati sopra el monte de Varalle: problemi e ricerche," in *Questi sono li Misteri che sono sopra el Monte de Varalle, in una "Guida" poetica del 1514*, ed. Stefania Stefani Perrone (Varallo: Società per la conservazione delle opere d'arte e dei monumenti in Valsesia, 1987), 94.

[15] Ernst Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 8 (1954): 105.

[16] Panzanelli, "Pilgimages in Hyperreality," 109.

[17] Christine Göttler, *Last Things: Art and the Religious Imagination in the Age of Reform* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 79.

[18] There is little documentary evidence surrounding this first sculptural group, and it is not known whether Caimi intended to install similar groups in all of his chapels, or if the illustrative figures were put in place by his immediate successors: see Panzanelli, "Pilgimages in Hyperreality," 133.

from the later tableaux in that it is slightly smaller than life-size and made entirely of wood without real hair or clothing. After Caimi's death, artist Gaudenzio Ferrari, who began working on the site in the early sixteenth century and remained there until 1528, expanded on the concept of the *Pietra dell'Unzione* sculptural group by developing tableaux that consisted of life-size figures made of wood or terracotta with frescoed backdrops, similar to the scene in the *Chapel of the Mocking of Christ*.



*Chapel of the Mocking of Christ*, Sacro Monte
di Varallo (photo by author)

The early tableaux, like the *Pietra dell'Unzione*, were particularly remarkable because visitors could physically interact with them, as indicated in the 1514 rhyming guide to Varallo, *Questi sono li misteri che sono sopra el Monte de Varalle*, which encouraged visitors to participate in the moments of Christ's life by touching and moving among the figures. The guide, first printed in Milan by a publishing house that specialized in religious literature, is one of the most valuable resources for studying these early stages of Varallo's development.[19] It consists of forty-seven rhyming octaves and a concluding sonnet describing Varallo's natural landscape and the various mysteries represented on the mountain at the time it was written. In tone, it is similar to other examples of popular devotional literature such as Niccolò da Osimo's *Giardino de orationi* (1494), written for young girls as a guide to meditative visualization of biblical events,[20] and the Pseudo-Bonaventurian *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, which encouraged the reader to contemplate and empathize with the human physical and psychological experiences of holy personages, particularly during episodes of the Passion.[21] The 1514 guide regularly associates the

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[19] Pier Giorgio Longo, "'Hi Loco visitando': temi e forme del pellegrinaggio ai *Misteri del Monte de Varalle* nella 'Guida' del 1514," in *Questi sono li Misteri che sono sopra el Monte de Varalle, in una "Guida" poetica del 1514*, ed. Stefania Stefani Perrone (Varallo: Società per la conservazione delle opere d'arte e dei monumenti in Valsesia, 1987), 111.

[20] Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 46.

[21] See, for example, the 1483 Venetian printing of the *Meditations*, which is discussed below.

internal state of the viewer with the external gestures of the figures in the tableaux, emphasizing the connection between the passions of the viewer and those of the represented holy figures; a connection made tangible and powerful through shared gestures and movements enacted in a recreated Holy Land.[22]

As in much popular devotional literature, the guide encourages readers to use their imaginations to situate themselves in the biblical scenes: it invites them to register the mysteries with their bodily senses and emotions, to "witness" them in the double sense of both seeing and attesting their truth through a powerful subjective response.[23] This affective engagement with the "mysteries" of the Sacro Monte would have aligned with Archbishop Charles Borromeo's use of the word *mysterium* in his 1576 treatise on preaching. Borromeo, who was an important supporter of the Sacro Monte, uses the word *mysterium* to describe the salvific messages that could be accessed through an emotional response to the sermons' more evident subject matter.[24] The devotional experience at Varallo is given another dimension because the guide makes specific reference to the topomimetic Palestinian landscape and life-size tableaux of the Sacro Monte, inviting pilgrims to perform physically the textual exhortations in order to participate in episodes of Christ's life.

Franciscans sustained a long history of meditational practice in which vision, both internal and external, played an integral part in enlightening the spirit and drawing the faithful closer to God. The Franciscan tradition had origins in the writings of Saint Augustine, who argued that gazing at a physical image could serve as a first step toward spiritual and intellectual "seeing" of the invisible divine. Devotional guides such as the *Meditations on the Life of Christ,* which Caimi quoted often in his sermons, and the 1514 guide evoke the somatic character of the act of looking, a process that could transform the viewer's physical and emotional state of being.[25] A 1483 edition of the *Meditations,* published in Venice ten years before Caimi officially acquired the land for the Sacro Monte, provides the reader with multisensory descriptions of the scenes of the Passion to be used as contemplative touchstones: "Here is the crown of thorns, which are sharp and hard like iron. It was so large that it covered the entire forehead and the whole head down to the neck. The divine head was pierced most cruelly: they affixed [the crown] to the head with canes and sticks." The author finishes this particular meditation with the

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[22] The responses evoked through the pilgrim's encounter with Varallo can be characterized as passions or affections, associated in the history of emotions with powerful feelings grounded in religious experience, particularly in the premodern period. For a good introduction to the history of emotions, particularly in the medieval and early modern periods, see James A. Russell, "Introduction to Special Section: On Defining Emotion," *Emotion Review* 4, no. 4 (October 2012): 337; Thomas Dixon, "Theology, Anti-Theology and Atheology: From Christian Passions to Secular Emotion," *Modern Theology* 15, no. 3 (1999): 297-330; and idem, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[23] The notion of witnessing closely resembles an idea discussed by Sarah McNamer in her analysis of *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ,* a translation of *Meditations on the Life of Christ,* in which she uses the literary context and etymology of "behold" in medieval English to make a case for Love's use of the word to describe a particularly empathetic kind of looking, one that implies a certain level of moral obligation on the part of the viewer who is "beholden" to the object of his or her gaze. See Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 134.

[24] John O'Malley, "Saint Charles Borromeo and His Preaching," in *San Carlo Borromeo: Catholic Reform and Ecclesiastical Politics in the Second Half of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. John M. Headley and John P. Tomaro (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1988), 145.

[25] Caimi also cited the *Giardino de oration* in his sermons. For a collection of Caimi's sermons, see Pier Giorgio Longo, "Alle origini del Sacro Monte di Varallo," in *Storia e storiografia del Sacro Monte di Varallo: osservazioni sulla "prima pietra" del S. Sepolcro*, ed. Jonathan Bober and Pier Giorgio Longo (Novara: Associazione di storia della chiesa novarese/Archivio storico diocesano, 1984), 19-98.

phrase: "In order that [the] compassionate soul considers what and how much you appear [*pare*] to have suffered, pious Jesus."[26] The detailed description gives a visual and tactile sense of the horrors of the scene, elucidating a particular moment of Christ's suffering during the Passion. However, the ultimate goal of the passage, as the author states, is not only to present a narrative, but also to stir the reader's empathy as a result of the conveyed experience of brutality. Similarly, the 1514 guide to Varallo is designed to elicit strong affective responses to biblical events. For instance, the guide asks pilgrims to gaze upon the inconsolable Virgin as she collapses into the arms of the two Marys after seeing her crucified son, stating that anyone who looked upon this scene would be moved to tears:

> Ivi da canto ce la sconsolata
> E intemerata vergine Maria
> Se con Giovani ognun qua mirare fiata
> A pianto moverase in compagnia
> Veder la matre in terra colocata
> Acompagnata luna laltra Maria
> Piangendo la morte del caro figliolo
> Quivi cascata per estremo dolo.
> ([1514] 1987, 34.)

> Here is the disconsolate
> And unblemished Virgin Mary
> Everyone here who looks with John
> Is moved to tears
> To see the mother fallen to the earth
> Accompanied by the other Marys
> Lamenting the death of her precious son
> Fallen here, because of her extreme suffering. [27]

Unlike the 1483 edition of the *Meditations,* the guide directly calls upon readers to engage with the described episode as if they were witnessing it, commanding them to look (*mirare*) with Saint John or see (*veder*) the Virgin collapse. The passage evokes a scene that is similar to what contemporary visitors to Varallo see in the *Chapel of the Lamentation*, where Saint John looks on with reserved shock as the three women mourn Christ's body.

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[26] "Coie la corona de spine marine; le quale son acute e dure come ferro. Et era cosi grande che coprina tutta la fronte e tutto il capo infino al collo. Et acio che più crudelmente el divino capo fosse perforato: lo p…cotevano [letters missing] sopra il capo con la canna e bastoni […] Onde anima compassiva considera quale and quanto piu te pare patisse, el pio Jesu": Pseudo-Bonaventure, *Le deuote meditatione sopra la passione del nostro signore* (Venice: Bernardinus Bernardinus,1483), http://bildsuche.digitale-sammlungen.de/index.html?c=viewer&lv=1&bandnummer=bsb00048514&pimage=00009&suchbegriff=&l=it, (actual page 51: my translation).
[27] Capitulo XVI of the 1514 guide in Perrone,*"Guida" poetica*, 34. My translation.

*Chapel of the Lamentation*, Sacro Monte di Varallo,
detail of St. John (photo by author)

Because the guide's evocative language accompanied the pilgrims' encounters with the Sacro Monte's tableaux, readers could register the described biblical scene with their bodily senses, which reinforced their position as emotionally invested witnesses. The above octave would have had particular impact because it invites the reader to share in the compassionate sorrow displayed by the life-size figure of Saint John who also witnesses the scene of Mary's fall, giving the reader/viewer both textual and visual models for his or her own empathetic response.

Both the 1514 guide and the Pseudo-Bonaventure's *Meditations* reconstruct biblical scenes by appealing to multiple senses, sometimes simultaneously. In the *Meditations*, the reader is invited to imagine cradling the newborn Christ: "Kiss the little feet of the Infant Jesus in His cradle, and beg of Our Lady to let you take him into your arms. Take Him, then, into your arms, keep Him there, earnestly look into His face, reverently kiss Him, and take delight in Him with all confidence."[28] By invoking the acts of looking and touching, the *Meditations* provides conduits of human experience through which the reader can connect to an event of cosmic importance. Because the 1514 guide encourages pilgrims to touch the tableaux, it is possible that pilgrims to Varallo would have performed this particular passage from the *Meditations* by cradling a figure of the Christ Child in the replicated Nativity Grotto.[29]

The nature of Varallo's topomimetic landscape at the time the 1514 guide was written contributed to the multisensory, participatory, and physically engaging experience of the images on the Sacro Monte, because the site was itself an image of the Holy Land. The guide emphasizes the importance of movement through the topography of the Sacro Monte, using the words 'ascend' [*ascendere*] and 'descend' [*scendere*] to describe the transitions between the mysteries, and noting particular features of the path, such as the number of steps required to reach the top of Varallo's Mount Calvary:

> "Poi dece otto gradi ascenderai
> A quell monte calvario nomato
> Dove che Christo in croce piangerai"

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[28] Pseudo-Bonaventure, *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, trans. M. Emmanuel, O.S.B. (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1934), 36-37. This is a translation of a version of the *Meditations* that includes Christ's life leading up to the Passion, which the 1483 edition does not.

[29] Nova, "'Popular' Art in Renaissance Italy," 117.

([1514] 1987, 29),

> Then you will ascend eighteen steps
> To the mountain called Calvary
> Where you will weep to see Christ on the cross.[30]

The act of climbing this specific hill is linked not just to the Crucifixion represented at its summit but also to the pilgrim's emotional reaction to the scene upon arriving. This kind of evocatively descriptive language corresponded with popular Franciscan texts like the *Meditations* and would likely have struck a familiar chord with the reader/viewer. The ability to enact the passages of the text along with the words would have enhanced an already recognizable devotional and meditative practice.

The intimate relationship between a location and the biblical events that had taken place there came from a pilgrimage tradition practiced in the Holy Land itself, in which the devotional experience of a sacred site was largely founded on the pilgrim's mental recreation of important scenes from Christ's life.[31] The 1514 guide emphasizes the connection between event and location by reminding the reader that the stories presented in the tableaux are occurring (virtually) in-situ, and encouraging viewers to engage with the figures and react to the scenes as if they were witnessing them personally. Pier Giorgio Longo suggests that locative words such as *qui, quivi, qua, donde, dove,* and *ove*, which are frequently used in the 1514 guide, act as mediators between the "domestic and familiar" temporal and spatial dimensions of the pilgrim and "the salvific and eschatological time and space, the eternal dimensions" of the events represented.[32] The interwoven localities of Varallo, created by the tableaux and mimetic *loci sacri*, connected the pilgrim's here and now with that of biblical Palestine. It is possible that Varallo provided an enveloping experience of Christ's life that even the Holy Land could not. The Sacro Monte enhanced the visitor's sense of witnessing by closing the spatial and temporal distances between pilgrims and Christological events, as well as the physical and emotional separation between viewers and images. Though the site changed dramatically with the interventions of Galeazzo Alessi, whose topographical and architectural renovations added new complexity to the relationship between the viewer and image on the Sacro Monte, the relic-like effect that connected Varallo's pilgrims to the biblical past was not diminished, but rather disciplined and reinforced.

**Alessi's *Vetriate:* spatial disruption and framed materiality**

In the 1560s Giacomo d'Adda, the aristocratic overseer of the Sacro Monte at Varallo, hired Galeazzo Alessi (1512-1572), a well-known architect working in Milan, to redesign the site's

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[30] Capitulo XV of the 1514 guide in Perrone, *"Guida" poetica*, 29. My translation.

[31] Chareyron, *Pilgrims to Jerusalem in the Middle Ages*, 83. See also Johannes Poloner, *John Poloner's Description of the Holy Land* (c. 1421), trans. Aubrey Stewart (London: Hanover Square, 1894; rpt. New York: AMS Press 1971), for an account of how pilgrims meditated on events that had transpired at sacred sites.

[32] Longo, "Hi Loco visitando," 114. For example: "*Dove* convene a questo humiliarsi / Un luoco *quivi* giaze picolino / *Donde* el sepulcro sancto po tocarse" (*Where* one humiliates oneself / A place *here* in a small [room] / *Where* one can touch the Holy Sepulcher), Capitulo XIX of the 1514 guide in Perrone, *"Guida" poetica*, 31. My translation.

chapels and grounds.[33] The site had fallen into disrepair since the 1530s after Gaudenzio Ferrari left and Giacomo, who became a guardian of the site through marriage, took on the responsibility of refurbishing it. Alessi recorded his plans in a book of drawings, the *Libro dei Misteri*, assembled between 1565 and 1569 while he was at Varallo. The comprehensive changes included an increase in the number of chapels from about twenty to a planned thirty-eight. In addition, the programmatic unity of the site was to be given greater clarity and emphasis. Replicating the arrangement of the Holy Land became less important as pilgrims were now supposed to move along specified paths that linked the chapels in narrative order. With the addition of new chapels, the narrative itself grew in scope: it now began with the story of Adam and Eve, and was intended to conclude with the Last Judgment, although that last chapel was never built.


Galeazzo Alessi, proposed map of the Sacro Monte, *Libro dei Misteri* (1565-1569)


Galeazzo Alessi, *Chapel of Adam and Eve* and *Chapel of the Last Judgment*,
cross-sections with tableaux, *Libro dei Misteri* (1565-1569)

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[33] Alessi, originally from Perugia, worked extensively in Milan, Genoa, Bologna and Naples, as well as outside Italy, as both an architect and urban planner. See Nancy Houghton Brown, *The Milanese Architecture of Galeazzo Alessi* (New York: Garland Pub., 1982).

Another significant feature of Alessi's designs was the addition of ornate paneled glass screens, or *vetriate*, in each chapel, dividing the tableaux from the visitor's space. The planned changes were extensive and not carried out in their entirety, but even such changes as were made transformed the site, as well as the kind of experience it offered to the pilgrim.
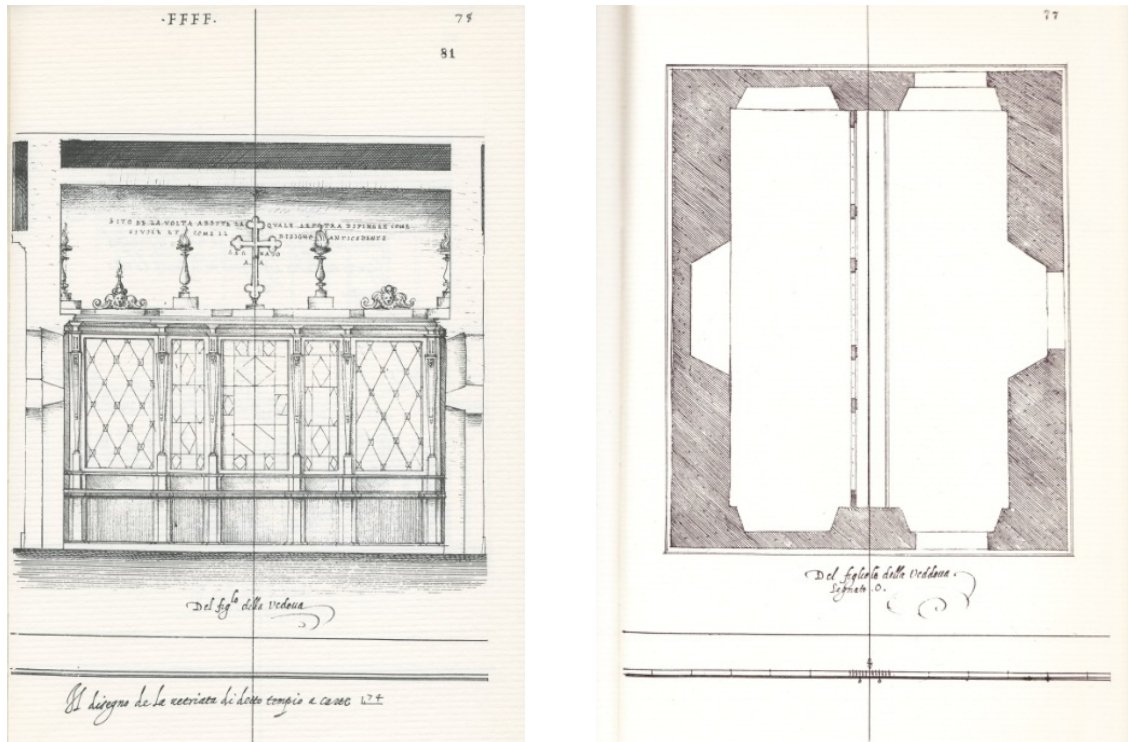


Galeazzo Alessi, *Chapel of the Widow*, elevation drawing of the *vetriata* and
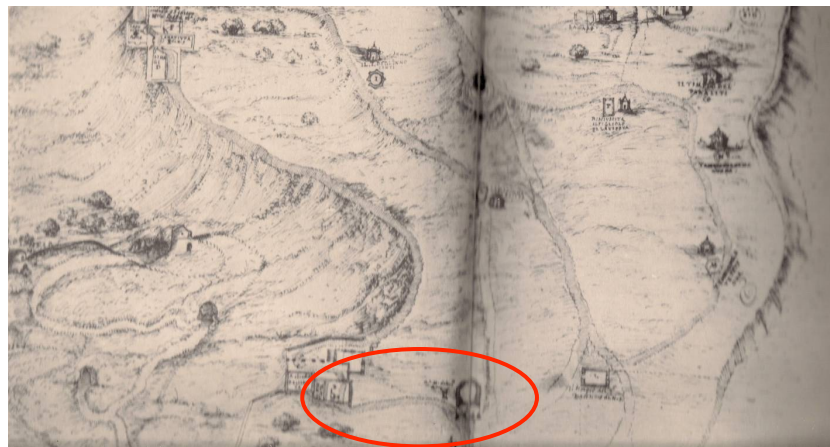floor plan, *Libro dei Misteri* (1565-1569)

In Alessi's design, Varallo's landscape factored differently into the visitor's experience than it did in the 1514 guide. Pilgrims to Alessi's Sacro Monte would not wander in a simulated Holy Land but rather move through a constructed narrative space along pathways connecting the chapels.[34] However, rather than distance the viewer from the affective power of the tableaux, Alessi intended his new arrangement to enhance their emotional impact. He felt that a diachronic viewing would focus the pilgrims' devotional efforts on tableaux so evocative that "no faithful soul could look [at them] with dry eyes."[35] The architect retained aspects of the Sacro Monte's mimetic character, but with the exception of the Via Dolorosa he contained the simulacra within the complexes or chapels, rather than in the landscape. For instance, *The Chapel of the Annunciation* was one of the Sacro Monte's oldest chapels, and Alessi notes in the

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[34] Alessi wrote that the lack of structure governing the pilgrims' movement seemed to him "à me pare difetto di grandissima importanza" (a defect of great importance) that distracted from meditation on the story of the life of Christ: Proemio 2, *Libro dei Misteri*.

[35] "Veramente non puo' anima fedele mirar' con occhi asciutti": Proemio 7, *Libro dei Misteri*.

*Libro dei Misteri* that he does not wish to change it because it was made in imitation of the Holy House of Loreto.[36]

The topographically enforced narrative order of the chapels, as well as newly designed chapels such as *Adam and Eve* and *The Last Judgment,* reoriented the pilgrim's experience of the Sacro Monte: rather than moving through a physically mimetic Holy Land, the pilgrim was to focus more on the Christological narrative. This new emphasis was made explicit from the beginning of the pilgrim's journey, which starts at the *Chapel of Adam and Eve*, and then continues down a trail to the left, which leads directly to the entrance to the *Chapel of the Annunciation*. Moving along the path, indicated in the image below, would reinforce the conceptual link between the Fall of Man and beginning of humanity's redemption. Alessi's Sacro Monte, while less topomimetic than Caimi's, was arranged as a complete pilgrimage experience that emphasized the salvific and, as Longo suggests, purgatorial journey up the mountain.[37]



Galezzo Alessi, site plan of the Sacro Monte di Varallo, *Libro dei Misteri* (1565- 1569)

Alessi's renovations to the Sacro Monte drastically shifted the devotional focus away from the pilgrims' combined visual, tactile, and spatial interaction with the tableaux to one that used vision as its primary conduit for devotional experience. However, the increased emphasis on vision did not simplify the viewer's engagement with the tableaux. On the contrary, the *vetriate* added a new set of complications by acting as framing devices that disciplined the viewer's physical access while allowing for veiled visual permeability. This dynamic, I will argue, enhanced the ambivalent nature of the images, situating them as both removed representations and relic-like objects.

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[36] "Seguendo adonche la medema strada gia fatta pervieni insimo alla Chiesa detta Sta Maria de Loreto, la quale per essere fabricata à quella imitazione non vorrei rimoverla ma solo adornarla di fuori come si vede nel suo disegno in questo libro" (Following the previously made street, one comes to the Church of Mary of Loreto; because it was made in imitation I do not want to remove it, but only decorate it outside as one sees in its design in this book): Proemio 3, *Libro dei Misteri* (my translation). Alessi seems to have had an interest in integrating holy or relic-like objects into a "sacred itinerary" on a grand architectural scale. At the same time that he was planning his renovations to the Sacro Monte he was also designing the Basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Assisi, inside of which is preserved the Chapel of the Transito and the Porziuncola, two important structures connected to the life of St. Francis. See Giulianna Algeri, "Alessi in Umbria," in *Galeazzo Alessi e l'architettura del Cinquecento: atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Genova, 16-20 aprile 1974*, ed. Ennio Poleggi (Genoa: Sagep Editrice, 1975), 193-201.

[37] Longo, "Hi loco visitando," 116.

The *vetriate* appear in three forms in the *Libro dei Misteri.* The first, and the one that most frequently recurs in Alessi's drawings, is the flat screen that runs parallel to the back wall of the tableaux, as seen in the plan for the *Chapel of the Widow*, which would have strictly limited the angles from which visitors to Varallo could have viewed the scenes. This type of spatial partition currently exists in almost all the chapels on the Sacro Monte. Its effects are evident in tableaux that were designed during and after Alessi's involvement in which the figures are only painted and decorated on the surfaces that can be seen from the other side of the screen. Appearing less frequently in the *Libro* are the gazebo-like structures that allow the viewer to circumambulate the tableaux, as seen in the plan for *Chapel of the Flight to Egypt* with labeled floor spaces belonging to either *le figure* or *i riguardanti* (see below). The least common screens in the *Libro dei Misteri* are those that have semi-circular protrusions extending into the viewer's space, like the one designed for the *Chapel of Christ Healing the Paralytic* (see below). The spaces designated for the viewers and the tableaux are, in most of the chapels, further separated by the inclusion of a low platform or several steps leading up to the scenes. As shown in the plan for the *Chapel of the Widow*, Alessi indicates the placement of the steps with thin solid lines drawn in front of the *vetriate*.
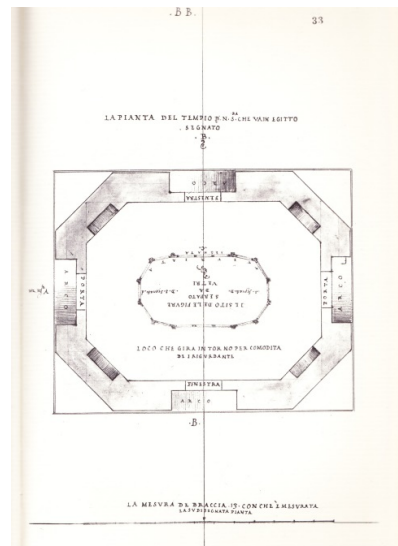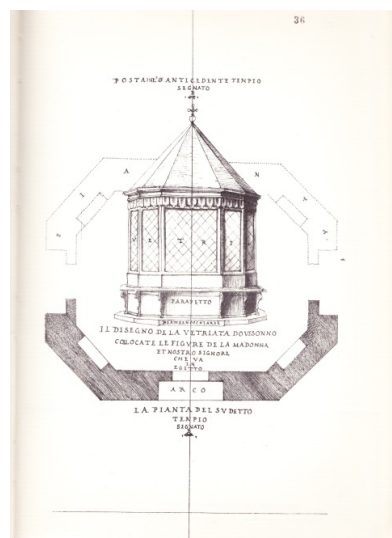


Galeazzo Alessi, *Chapel of the Flight to Egypt,* elevation drawing of the *vetriata* and floor plan with labeled spaces for tableau and viewers, *Libro dei Misteri* (1565-1569)
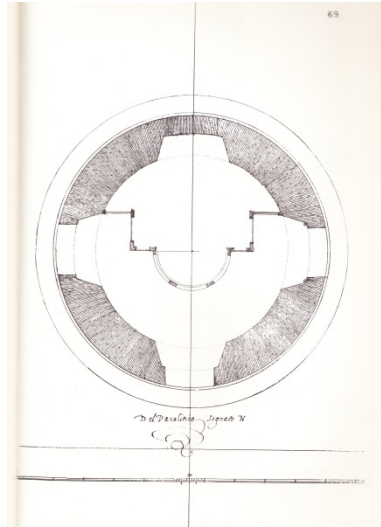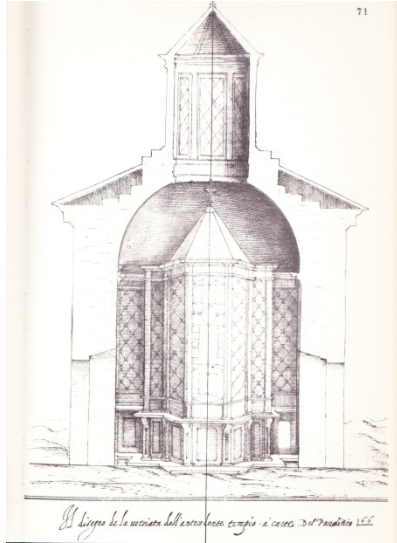
Galeazzo Alessi, *Chapel of Christ Healing the Paralytic*, elevation drawing of *vetriata* and floor plan, *Libro dei Misteri* (1565-1569)

Alessi must have felt that there was something important about spatially dividing the realm of the viewer from the realm of the biblical scenes, because he makes a point of retaining one of the only spatial partitions that seems to have existed prior to his involvement at Varallo: the screen in the *Chapel of the Annunciation*.[38] In the chapel plan, the partition is denoted by two lines of differently-sized dots interrupted by thick rectangles that represent support beams.
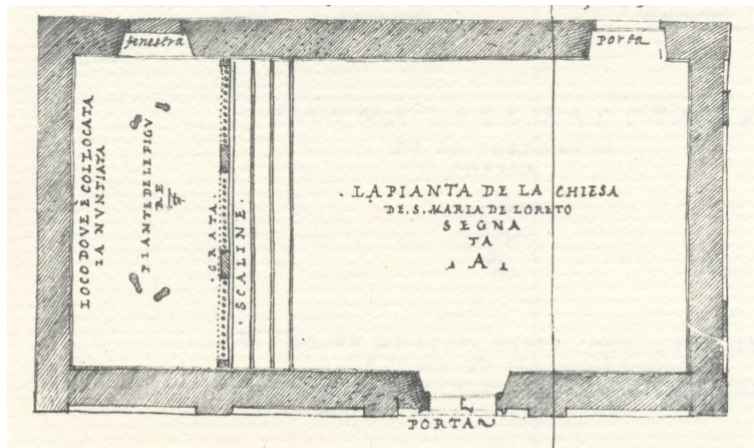


Galeazzo Alessi, *Chapel of the Annunciation*, *Libro dei Misteri* (1565-1569)[39]

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[38] It is likely a partition also existed in the *Chapel of the Crucifixion*, although no floor plan exists for this chapel, probably because Alessi did not intend on extensively altering it.
[39] In the plan, the location of the figures of the Virgin and Gabriel are indicated by two sets of footprints to the left of the *grata*.

*Chapel of the Mocking of Christ*, Sacro Monte di Varallo (photo by author)


Alessi labels the partition with the word *grata*, or grille, which suggests that the spaces between the rows of dots represent small apertures through which the viewer could glimpse the tableau. It is likely that the grille existed prior to Alessi's involvement at the Sacro Monte, inasmuch as he does not provide an elevation drawing of it: instead he does so for the *vetriate* that he designed for the other chapels, and he notes that he did not include measurements in the plan because the chapel was already built.[40] Many of the present-day partitions at the Sacro Monte look similar to the grille suggested in Alessi's drawing, which gives us a sense of the frustrated viewing experience of a sixteenth-century visitor.

In the sixteenth century, difficulty of access could imply importance, and frames could bestow power by obscuring their object as much as by making it visible. For instance, in 1582 Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti used reliquaries as an analogy to explain the appropriate mode of writing about theological mysteries, stating that the most lofty secrets of God should be intentionally cloaked in allegory: "in the same way that a thin cloth or a transparent crystal is put in front of the sacred relics, the great secrets of things eternal are to be protected in their majesty, and also, by this means, the people more efficiently kept in due reverence."[41] The viewer needed to be aware of the physical partition between his or her space and that of the relic in order to grasp the importance of the framed thing, in a similar way that readers of texts would first need to engage with an allegory before extracting a deeper meaning.

Similarly to reliquaries, the *vetriate* conferred an aura of specialness on the tableaux not only by restricting access to them, but also by surrounding the scenes with visual ornamentation. In walking into the *Chapel of the Widow*, the viewer's attention would be immediately arrested by the *vetriata,* composed of many differently-sized square and diamond panels set within a carved wooden frame, surmounted by a large trefoil cross, torches and two winged *putti* heads (only one of which is crowned with a diminutive taper). Sixteenth-century viewers would have understood that an elaborately decorated container signaled the importance

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[40] Alessi states that he does not include measurements for buildings that were already made and which he planned on keeping, such as the Loreto Complex. He does plan on adding to the complex, but writes on the plan: "La minuta de la pianta di S. Maria d'Loreto con li altri edifitii a se congionti fatti da me, solo racognoscere i lochi de le capelle" (The draft of the plan of [the chapel] of the Virgin of Loreto with the other adjoining buildings, made by me only to distinguish the locations of the chapels) and "Quivi no occorano misure essendo gli'edifitii fatti" (Measurements are not provided for already-constructed buildings): *Libro dei Misteri*, 15. My translation.

[41] As translated in Robert Klein and Henri Zerner, *Italian Art 1500-1600: Sources and Documents* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 126.

of the object within it. In his architectural treatise of 1577 Charles Borromeo states that the reliquaries placed conspicuously in a church should be made of "precious marble and be richly decorated on the outside with sculpture that is distinguished for the pious and religious character of its ornamentation."[42] Similarly, Borromeo mentions that, when financially possible, the top step of chapel entrances should be fitted with iron railings and should "be adorned either at the bottom, or in the middle, or at the top with small pillars and embellishments properly rendered to produce a graceful effect."[43] The peripheral decoration of things that framed or contained objects was not only visually interesting in its own right, but also guided and informed the relationship between the viewer and the framed object. The *vetriate* are frames, not just in the sense that they partition space, demarcating which area of the chapel interior belongs to the tableaux and which to the viewer; they also structure the viewer's mode of looking. In fact, as Christine Göttler observes, Alessi designed some of his *vetriate* with the explicit purpose of literally coloring the viewer's perception of the scenes within. For the unbuilt subterranean tableaux of *Purgatory*, *Limbo,* and *Hell*, the glasswork of each screen was to be "colored according to the imaginary nature of each part of the underworld."[44]
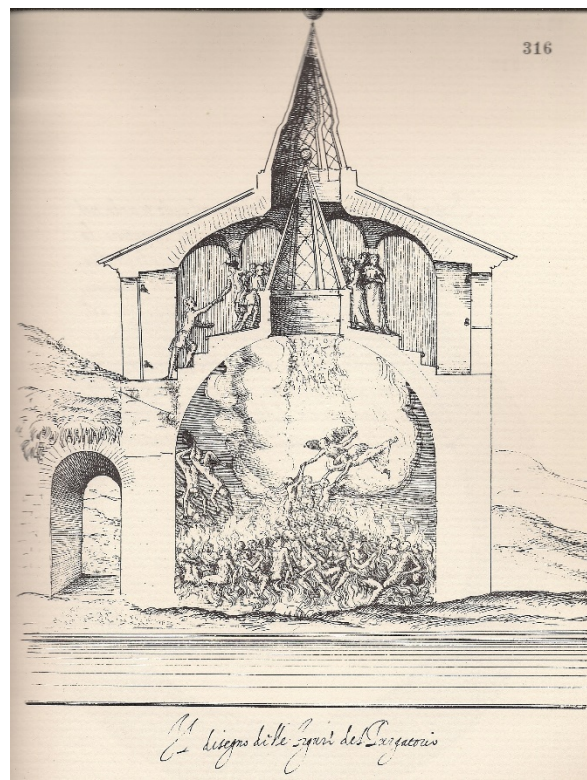


Galeazzo Alessi, *Purgatory*, *Libro dei Misteri* (1565-1569)

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[42] Evelyn Carol Voelker, "Charles Borromeo's *Instructiones fabricate et supellectilis ecclesiasticae*, 1577: A Translation with Commentary and Analysis" (PhD diss., Syracuse University, 1977), 207. See also Steven Ostrow's discussion of the relationship between architecture and the display of relics in Counter-Reformation Rome, particularly Sixtus V's installation of a tabernacle over the Presepio in Santa Maria Maggiore: Steven Ostrow, *Art and Spirituality in Counter-Reformation Rome: The Sistine and Pauline Chapels in S. Maria Maggiore* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[43] Voelker, "*Instructiones*," 191.

[44] Christine Göttler, *Last Things: Art and the Religious Imagination in the Age of Reform* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 102.

There are recognizable formal and functional similarities between the *vetriate* and containers of the sacred, such as reliquaries and monstrances. On a basic but significant level they both completely envelop the object within them. It is worth noting that Alessi chose to divide the viewer's space from the tableaux by using a glass structure spanning from floor to ceiling rather than a low railing. Railings were a viable option for partitioning ecclesiastical space, as Borromeo describes in his treatise, and certainly would have been less expensive.[45] Instead, Alessi's *vetriate* create a semi-transparent separation between the viewer and the tableaux, particularly in the case of the centrally planned screens, which culminate in a sort of cupola, unlike the flat screens, which do not reach all the way to the ceiling of the chapel. Enclosing an object within this limitedly accessible space establishes a certain kind of physical, spiritual, and emotional viewer/object relationship in which the object becomes significant and even precious. Reliquaries and the *vetriate*, as Alessi presents them in the *Libro dei Misteri*, are often richly decorated, which additionally notifies the viewer of the importance of the interior object.[46]
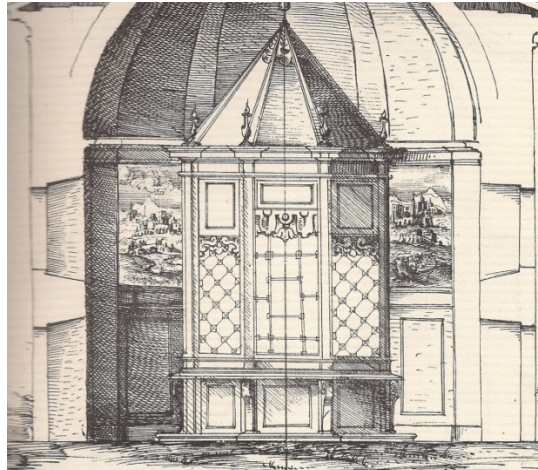
Left: *Reliquary of Mary Magdalene*, Tuscany, 14th or 15th century, Metropolitan Museum of Art
Right: Elevation drawing of the *vetriate* in the *Chapel of the Temptation*, *Libro dei Misteri* (1565-1569)

The *vetriate* and reliquaries also served similar functions in terms of the tactile component of the viewing experience. Going back to the first installation of figural groups on the Sacro Monte in the early sixteenth century, part of tableaux's impact came from their tactile availability. Alessi's screens, however, did not remove the importance of touch from the Sacro

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[45] Cost is an issue that Alessi brings up several times in the 'Proemio'; for instance: "pare à me per seguitare com' ho detto, l'ordine, si debba fabricare di nuovo, non spaventandosi della gran spesa": Proemio 8, *Libro dei Misteri*.
[46] Caroline Walker Bynum states that reliquaries "sublimate partition and deadness by sheathing such stuff in the gold and gems specifically associated in Scripture and sermon with the life of the heavenly Jerusalem": see Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (Brooklyn NY: Zone Books, 2011), 70. Craig Harbison identifies a similar phenomenon in fifteenth-century Flemish religious art, in which artists would craft elaborate frames to both contain the sacred quality of the image and "certify" the holiness of the depicted figure: see Harbison, "Visions and Meditations in Early Flemish Painting," *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 15, no. 2 (1985): 108.

Monte, but rather redirected it onto the *vetriate*. In a similar manner, reliquaries could be touched in lieu of the relic inside. Borromeo outlines this option in his treatise: "two poles should be made of ebony […] or of some other similar kind of hard wood. These should be three cubits long and should be finished with a top of silver plate having two small hooks from which the faithful may suspend their rosaries in order to touch the sacred relics, or rather the vases in which they are enclosed."[47] For Varallo's visitors, kneeling against the wooden partitions as the lone pilgrim does in the profile view of the *Chapel of the Temptation* (see below), or perhaps pressing one's face against panes of glass, would have created a tactile experience that framed the tableau as much as the visual barrier created by the *vetriate*.

Many of the screens were constructed after Alessi left Varallo, and it is difficult to know how closely those that are there today follow his designs: the current ones all seem to be replacements of the originals, either wholly or in part. Some of the wooden elements may be original, though some appear to come from the 19th or even early 20th century, and the colored glass seen in many chapels seems quite recent. But visitors are still separated from the tableaux by paned glass screens that correspond at least in their location and rough configuration to those Alessi planned. Although we cannot know exactly what it would have been like to look through Alessi's *vetriate*, as many of his designs were not carried out or later changed, it is easy to imagine that such a conglomeration of differently-sized glass shapes formed into patchwork patterns, would have distorted the image behind it, fragmenting the viewing experience itself.



*Chapel of the Massacre of the Innocents,* present-day
glass screen, Sacro Monte di Varallo (photo by author)

Today, about half of the forty-four chapels on the Sacro Monte have glass screens that resemble Alessi's *vetriate*, with small panels whose uneven surfaces reflect glare with rippling inconsistency. In order to resolve the image behind the screens, the viewer must get as close as possible to them, since from a distance the glass is frequently all that is visible. Fortunately for modern viewers, the task of looking is made easier due to the intermittent removal of glass panels, though this was not a convenience Alessi allowed for in his designs. The architect further encouraged physical proximity to the *vetriate* by including platforms attached to the screens on which pilgrims could kneel, as shown in the drawing of the *Chapel of the*

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[47] Voelker, "*Instructiones*," 216.

*Temptation*. Bruise-inducing stone or wood kneelers exist today in front of all of the screened chapels on the Sacro Monte, providing a position for sustained close viewing of the tableau through the partition. The screens demand the physical proximity of the viewer, yet this requisite closeness serves as a reminder of the unassailable distance that ultimately remains between the viewer and image.



Galeazzo Alessi, Profile view of *vetriata* in *Chapel
of the Temptation*, *Libro dei Misteri* (1565-1569)

The planned installation of the *vetriate* may have been motivated by entirely practical considerations—the desire to protect the figures from wear and tear—but several scholars have detected something else: an effort, motivated by the spirit of the Counter-Reformation, to discipline the faithful in a more rigorous way, to prevent them from investing too much significance in the material images and a tactile relation to them, and to channel their devotion through the immaterial medium of vision. The proper use of religious images generated long and heated debates in the sixteenth century and, in its final meeting in 1563, the Council of Trent settled on the last-minute declaration that images of Christ, the Virgin, and the saints should receive "due honor and veneration […] not that any divinity, or virtue, is believed to be in them, on account of which they are to be worshipped […] but because the honor which is shown them is referred to the prototypes which those images represent."[48] The new narrative emphasis of Alessi's plan, coupled with the installation of the *vetriate*, would have removed the biblical scenes from the bodily experiences of the viewer, necessitating a mode of engagement that would seem to deny the physical dimension of the experience as much as possible.[49]

Evidence for this interpretation can be found in Alessi's *Libro dei Misteri*. In the drawing of the *Chapel of the Temptation of Christ*, we see a figure in profile kneeling in front of the *vetriata*, hands clasped in prayer. Scholars note that this is the only chapel design in which Alessi shows a figure in direct relation to one of the screens, and Christine Göttler has suggested that by including such a figure in a drawing of a chapel dedicated to the Temptation, Alessi alludes to the distracting or "tempting" allure of the image's materiality that his design has made

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[48] *Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Ecumenical Council of Trent Celebrated under the Sovereign Pontiffs Paul III, Julius III and Pius IV*, trans. Rev. J. Waterworth (Chicago: The Christian Symbolic Publication Society, 1848), 235.

[49] Longo, "Hi loco visitando," 115.

possible to overcome.[50] The drawing also demonstrates another aspect of the disciplinary character of the *vetriate*: the step or platform in front compelled the visitor approaching the mysteries to kneel, even if only to get a better view of the tableau through the glass, putting the pilgrim in a physical position of reverent submission.

The disciplinary function of architecture at the Sacro Monte corresponds with contemporaneous Counter-Reformation efforts to discipline desires that led to moral corruption and/or theological confusion. Illicit temptations were satisfied through the senses, and thus Counter-Reformers took measures to control unnecessary or excessive sensory engagement with desirable things. Archbishop Charles Borromeo's treatise on ecclesiastical architecture outlined the ways in which the sightlines and spatial positioning of the faithful could be controlled in order to limit occasions in which the faithful could entertain their sensual desires. In this treatise, Borromeo addresses the importance of the designation and separation of space in maintaining appropriate behavior in church, specifically addressing confessionals, wooden partitions dividing women from men within the church, and screens within monastic churches that separated nuns in the "inner church" from the altar in the "outer church."[51] A 1563 report issued by the Milan Cathedral reflects the Counter-Reformation concern regarding the improper mixing of the sacred and profane, particularly in terms of the types of behavior and sorts of people allowed within certain spaces in the church. Borromeo addressed the concerns of the cathedral in his 1574 *Editto per il conversar con riverenza e divozione nelle chiese*, imposing strict rules about access and conduct in church.[52] In this same edict, Borromeo was additionally concerned with disciplining the senses. Just as Augustinian and Franciscan thinkers recognized the power of the senses, and particularly vision, in heightening devotional experience, sixteenth-century ecclesiastical authorities believed that vision, if not controlled could lead to gravely sinful behavior. As a result, devices like the confessional were developed to remove the temptation of the senses, allowing only for an auditory connection between the confessor and the penitent.[53]

Several of the spatial organizing strategies proposed in Borromeo's treatise appear in some form in Alessi's chapel floor plans. Regarding the entrance to minor chapels, for instance, Borromeo states that the chapel floors should be raised from the main church floor by two steps, and that the chapel floor should begin at the level of the second step.[54] In the *Chapel of the Entry into Jerusalem*, as well as in chapels with rounded *vetriate* such as the *Chapel of the Samaritan Woman*, two steps, indicated by two solid lines drawn in front of the screen, lead up to an elevated floor where the tableaux are located. The treatise goes on to say that "the railings

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[50] Göttler, *Last Things*, 95.

[51] "Because it is an ancient […] custom attested to by blessed Chrysostom, and one in use throughout most of this province, that in church men should be separate from women […] There should be a partition down the nave from the entrance door to the [rails of the high altar.]" Charles Borromeo, as cited in Evelyn Carole Voelker, "Borromeo's Influence on Art and Architecture," in *San Carlo Borromeo: Catholic Reform and Ecclesiastical Politics in the Second Half of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. John M. Headley and John P. Tomaro (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1988), 179.

[52] Wietse de Boer, *The Conquest of the Soul: Confession, Discipline, and Public Order in Counter-Reformation Milan* (Boston: Brill, 2001), 107.

[53] Ibid., 113.

[54] "[The chapel entrance] should also be sufficiently raised as to be on a level with the floor of the chapel forming its entrance step, and only one step should be constructed for the entrance to the chapel in addition to this step": Voelker, "Instructiones," 180.
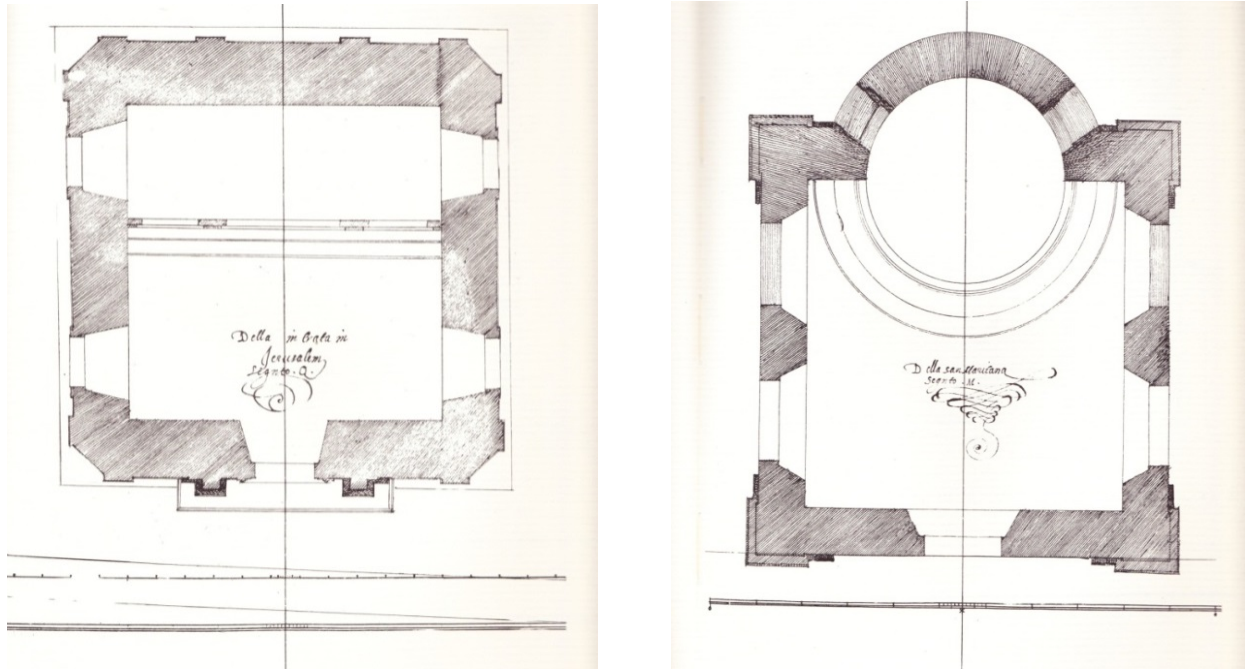
Galeazzo Alessi, floor plans of the *Chapel of the Entry into Jerusalem* and the *Chapel of the Samaritan Woman*, *Libro dei Misteri* (1565-1569)

[of the chapels] should be tightly interwoven with some complex iron work from the bottom part to about the height of one cubit [43.64 cm] in order to keep out the dogs."[55] While these railings, like the *vetriate*, would have certainly helped to protect the chapel from trespassers, canine or otherwise, they also clearly designated the chapel as spatially, and often functionally, removed from the main church.[56] Though the screens Alessi designed at Varallo are not wholly analogous to Borromeo's prescriptions for chapel construction, it is clear that they were part of the same strategy of imposing order and restrictions on religious space in order to standardize devotional practice and discipline the viewer's physical and visual access to the images.

Nevertheless, the transparency of the *vetriate* allow for visual access, and therefore opportunities for temptation. In the 1574 *Editto*, Borromeo states that the veils of women in church should not be transparent so as to "stimulate the cupidity of the eyes *all the more intensely*."[57] The purpose of the disciplinary architecture at Varallo was to make the tableaux contained within it more difficult to access, ostensibly out of fear that improper contact would alter the delicate balance of the pilgrims' devotional engagement with them, sending the images too far towards the realm of sensuous idols rather than pious representations. However, it is by virtue of the fact that the tableaux were "veiled" and physically separated from the viewers that their power as physical objects was retained or even augmented. The nature of the pilgrim's limited engagement with the tableau is particularly evident in a drawing for the *Chapel of the Temptation*, which explicitly indicates how the viewer is meant to use the *vetriata*: kneel on the low platform, fold hands, and look through the glass. The platform would have arrested the

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[55] Voelker, "Instructiones," 180.

[56] Borromeo notes that the chapels should be set apart in such a way that masses could be performed within them without disrupting the liturgy of the main church.

[57] As cited in de Boer, *The Conquest of the Soul*, 110 (my emphasis).

pilgrims' movement in front of the images, bringing the viewers close and holding them in contemplative stillness.[58] However, looking through the *vetriata* from a kneeling position was not without difficulties. The glass panels begin just at the viewer's eyelevel, if not slightly above it. As a comparison with the elevation drawing of the *vetriata* will show that the figure's gaze is obstructed above the shelf on which he rests his elbows by a narrow panel of wood that runs around the circumference of the base of the screen. As a result, he must tilt his head back in order to see through the glass, thereby rendering him unable to perceive the tableau in its entirety.
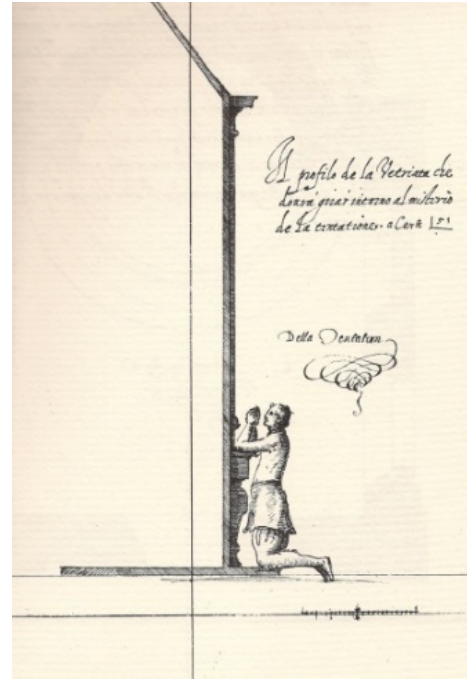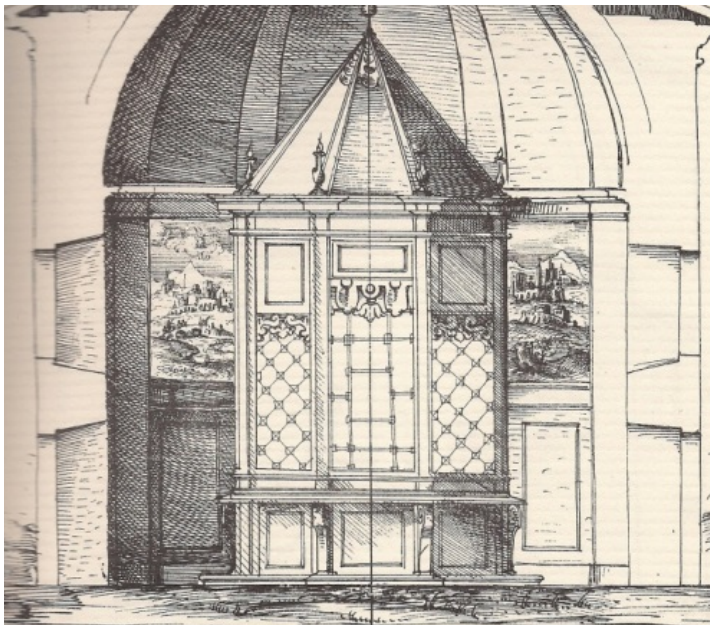


Galeazzo Alessi, elevation and profile view, *Chapel of the Temptation*, *Libro dei Misteri* (1565-1569)

Göttler suggests that, by including this drawing in the section dedicated to the *Chapel of the Temptation*, Alessi is alluding to the distracting allure of the image's materiality, which could be controlled by making it impossible for the viewer to engage corporeally with the tableau.[59] Certainly, the drawing makes clear that the *vetriate* hindered sensory access to the tableaux. Nevertheless, where there is discipline there is often (increased) desire. Francesco Bocchi, in his 1592 essay on the miracle-working painting of the Annunciation at the Santissima Annunziata in Florence, recounts that, due to the power of the image's "miraculous character" (*costume*), it was shielded from people clamoring to catch a glimpse of it. When finally revealed to the fervent crowds, Bocchi recalls, the painting "stupef[ied] those of simple mind and pure

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[58] For a discussion of shifts in devotional movement and gesture, see Thomas Lentes, "'As far as the eye can see…': Rituals of Gazing in the Late Middle Ages," in *The Mind's Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffery F. Hamburger and Anne-Marie Bouché (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 365.
[59] Göttler, *Last Things*, 95.

intellect," and inspired tears of excessive joy.[60] Perhaps it was in part because viewers had been deprived of this image that it incited such a powerful response once it was no longer visually withheld from them. Alessi's *vetriate* perform a certain amount of both visual and physical withholding, permanently veiling the tableaux behind the glass screens, increasing curiosity about the physical nature of the images while simultaneously denying the satisfaction of that curiosity.

Many scholars have identified the ways in which framing devices alter the perception of the thing they frame. In his musings on the subject, José Ortega y Gasset suggests that a "frame will convert whatever happens to be visible within it into a picture."[61] By this, he means that the frame creates a space that the viewer recognizes as distinct from his or her own, and acts as a neutral divider between reality and unreality.[62] Along similar lines, Victor Stoichita, in his discussion of vision-paintings, suggests that rendering religious visions as images allowed for the viewer's emotional engagement, while simultaneously creating a kind of objective relationship between viewer and image that prevented the inspiration of "uncontrollable mystical activities."[63] Christine Göttler understands the *vetriate* as "translating the three-dimensional groups into 'images' or 'representations' more evocative of flat painting," which "channels" the emotional power of the scenes while at the same time establishing a disciplinary distance.[64] As these interpretations show, frames can perform two functions at once: focusing the viewer's attention while establishing separation. However, separation does not necessarily imply the diminished impact of the framed object, and I am inclined to agree with Göttler's argument that visual and spatial distancing can even increase the intensity of the image's affective power.

The function of the *vetriate* as spatial dividers is clear in Alessi's drawings. The architect takes measures in the *Libro dei Misteri* in order to emphasize visually the difference between the viewer's space and that of the tableaux. In order to convey the spatial and visual disjuncture created by the screens, Alessi not only textually labels the viewers' space and the images' space in the floor plans (as in the *Chapel of the Flight to Egypt*); in his elevation drawings he also creates a different spatial logic for the tableaux than for the interior of the chapels. For instance, in Alessi's version of the tableau of the *Chapel of the Temptation*, Christ and the Devil stand in an environment that exists independently from the chapel space, delineated by the mediating presence of a cylindrical *vetriata*.

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[60] "Stupisce chi è di mente semplice e di puro intelletto, resta smarrito [bewildered] chi è savio e di gran senno, riman confuso chi è per li vizii e per li errori di animo maculato: e vinti dalla luce miracolosa e divina che dal volto santissimo e mirabile, tosto che è scoperto, si stende all' occhio umano, con lagrime versate da soverchio di allegrezza, fanno fede largamente delle divine grazie, le quali Iddio dona a chi si volta a lui con puro e santo affetto.[...] Questo miracoloso costume di questa santissima Madonna così è potente, che non prima corre
la vista di quello all'occhio umano, che si prova mirabil forza, si muta l'animo, anzi si avanza in virtù, e in avvisi divini e alti si accende": Francesco Bocchi, *Della Imagine Miracolosa della SS. Nunziata di Firenze* (Florence: Tommaso Baracchi, 1852), 41.

[61] José Ortega y Gasset, "Meditations on the Frame," *Perspectiva* 26 (1990): 187.

[62] Ibid., 188.

[63] Victor Stoichita, *Visionary Experience in the Golden Age of Spanish Art* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 1995), 26. Stoichita specifically says: "Far from inspiring uncontrollable mystical activities, the contemplation of the vision-painting is equivalent to 'taming' the visionary experience."

[64] Göttler, *Last Things*, 101.

Galeazzo Alessi, *Chapel of the Temptation*, cross-section with tableau, *Libro dei Misteri*  (1565-1569)

Nevertheless, the boundaries between the inside and outside of the *vetriata* are not perfectly clear. It is difficult to know, based on the drawing, where the tableau would have been located within the chapel interior, as there is no indication of the depth of the chapel's floor. As a result, the tableau's fictive landscape does not seem to originate within the chapel, but rather in the landscape of the Sacro Monte itself, indicated by loosely drawn low hills and shrubs surrounding the exterior of the chapel. The visual link reinforces the connection between the biblical scene and the experience of the Sacro Monte's landscape as a "new Jerusalem," similar to the one where Christ would have walked.[65] Conversely, the tableau's sky is not an extension of the world outside the chapel, but is rather severely capped by the pointed roof of the *vetriata*, sharply dividing the tableau from the chapel interior. Alessi's drawing creates a clear distinction between the realm of the viewer and that of the tableau, while simultaneously blending Varallo's natural landscape with the scene encased inside the *vetriata*. The visual connection between the tableau and landscape of the Sacro Monte alludes to the *vetriata*'s visual permeability, while at the same time reinforcing a spatial dissonance between the chapel space and the tableau.

The elevations in the *Libro dei Misteri* do not provide blueprints for constructing the chapels, but rather evoke the sense of simultaneous rupture and cohesion among the spaces of the viewer, image, and landscape produced by Alessi's designs. In three dimensions, the unsteady spatial relationships expressed in the drawings might have been experienced through the viewer's recognition of the tableau's landscape as similar to that which he or she had just left to enter the chapel. Nonetheless the viewer remains separated by the glass barrier, preventing any interaction with the scene other than to look at it. Rather than diminish the original relic-like effect of the tableaux that connected the viewer to biblical events through a sense of personal witnessing, the permeability of the glass screens enhanced the tableaux's ambivalent nature by

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[65] See Göttler for a discussion of Alessi's representations of Varallo's landscape as *parerga*: Göttler, *Last Things*, 91.

demarcating them from the perceptual space of viewer, while maintaining their connection to the simulated holy site.

The tableaux are not relics in the usual sense: they were not made out of a miraculous material, nor were they the physical remains or belongings of holy personages. However, as the 1514 rhyming guide demonstrates, the tableaux, in conjunction with the site's original topomimetic landscape, provided pilgrims with a secondary connection to the episodes of Christ's life. In the context of the Sacro Monte, the tableaux had traditionally served a relic-like function, enabling the faithful to achieve a deep physical and emotional connection with sacred events through contact with the material images. Alessi's *vetriate,* though they would have obscured the immediate and total contact between pilgrim and image, would not have challenged the reliquary quality of the tableaux, but rather, as Paleotti suggests, kept the viewer in "due reverence" of the witnessing experience that they offered.

**Conclusion**

Peter Brown argues that reliquaries and shrines "carefully maintained tension between distances and proximity [which] ensured one thing: *praesentia*, the physical presence of the holy."[66] A crystal monstrance reveals the material preciousness of the relic to the viewer, who remains inalterably separated from it just as the pilgrim to the Sacro Monte is decidedly removed from possibility of physical interaction with the tableaux. It is this very separation that drives desire, and that enhances the divine mystery of the object behind the glass. The tension between proximity and distance at Varallo runs deeper than Alessi's designs for the *vetriate*, grounded in the very purpose of the fifteenth-century formation of the site. At once geographically close to European pilgrims and simultaneously offering immersive simulacra of the Christian *loci sacri* from a world away, Varallo has always been balanced between here and there, then and now. The place as a whole is itself a reliquary, allowing the visitor to come close to the Nativity Grotto, Christ's last footprint, or the stone that covered the Holy Sepulcher. Yet the knowledge that these are replicas never lets the pilgrim arrive completely.

The observations offered above concur with Christine Göttler's recent characterization of Varallo as a "laboratory" where the nature and function of devotional imagery and experience were challenged during a tumultuous period of religious controversy.[67] While initially seeming unequivocally to be the product of Counter-Reformation anxieties over idolatrous behavior, a sustained look at the *vetriate* points to an ambivalent viewer/image relationship that is perhaps a more accurate reflection of the larger Catholic crisis of images during the sixteenth century. As Wietse de Boer indicates, even Archbishop Charles Borromeo, for all his mistrust of the senses, nevertheless felt that it was "precisely the material aspects of the church […] that ought to instill proper respect in the faithful."[68] The long-standing debate over the appropriate veneration due to an image culminated in the Council's decree that an image should be respected, not because of any innate sacrality in its material form, but because of the prototype to which it refers. However, the screens evidently did not provide an easy distinction

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[66] Peter Brown, *The Cult of Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 88.

[67] Christine Göttler, "The Temptation of the Senses at the Sacro Monte di Varallo," in *Religion and the Senses in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Wietse de Boer and Christine Göttler, Intersections: Interdisciplinary Studies in Early Modern Culture (Boston: Brill, 2013), 26.

[68] de Boer, *Conquest of the Soul*, 118.

between representation and prototype or image and relic. Rather, by restricting the viewer's physical access to the tableaux, considered to be a dangerous foray into the adoration of the material, the *vetriate* created a space for the tableaux of the kind that was typically reserved for sacred objects, thereby reinforcing the importance of the physical image itself.

Alessi seemed to be well aware of the intellectual turmoil surrounding images during the time he was redesigning the Sacro Monte; his drawing for the Chapel of the Last Judgment, though never built, was based on Michelangelo's highly controversial painting of the same subject, complete with Charon brutally herding condemned souls from his ferry of the damned.
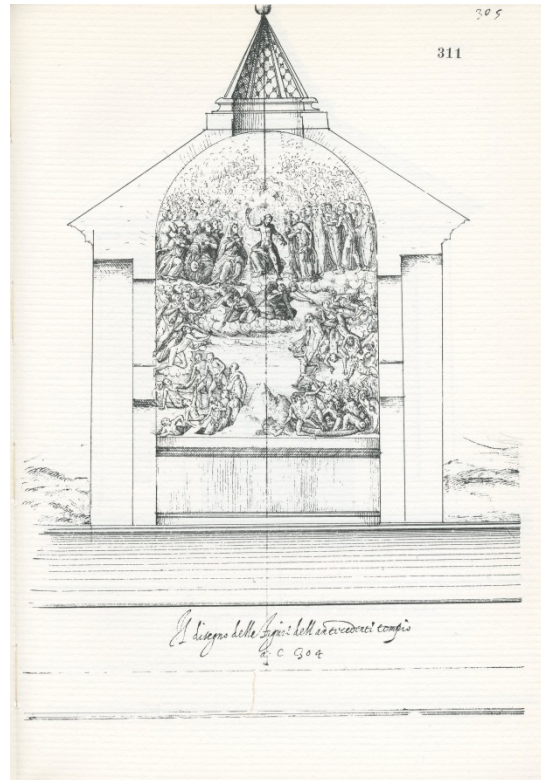


Galeazzo Alessi. *Chapel of the Last Judgment*, cross-section with tableau, *Libro dei Misteri* (1565-1569)

While Michelangelo's painting flew in the face of many of the Counter-Reformation policies on images, Alessi nevertheless chose to include it in his design, albeit in a less inflammatory rendition. It seems significant that Alessi chose to end the pilgrimage through the Sacro Monte with a copy of an image that caused such a scandal among the enforcers of Counter-Reformation decorum. Indeed, it is tempting to imagine that its inclusion self-consciously alludes to the complicated viewer/image relationship established by Alessi's renovations. However, due to the lack of textual evidence in the *Libro dei Misteri* and elsewhere, it is difficult to know exactly why Alessi designed the screens as he did. Nevertheless, his drawings are deliberate and detailed, which invites an investigation of how the *vetriate* may have affected the devotional experience of Varallo. The screens represent an intersection of seemingly incompatible ideas, namely the decorporealization of devotional encounters with images together with a simultaneous emphasis on the preciousness of the physical image. Certainly, the ambivalent viewer/image relationship produced within the context of the Sacro Monte reflects

the multiple and subtle understandings of the role of imagery in devotional practices in the sixteenth century in Italy, whose functions and limits had by 1563 not yet been definitively established by the ecclesiastical authorities.

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