

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
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**THE LONGEVITY OF THE MAIOLICA EX-VOTO TRADITION AT THE
MADONNA DEI BAGNI: MATERIALIZING SACRED TIME AND SPACE**

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Abstract

The Longevity of the Maiolica Ex-voto Tradition at the Madonna dei Bagni: Materializing Sacred Time and Space

Tara A. Field

This research takes as case study the church of the Madonna dei Bagni near Deruta, Italy, where a tradition of painted maiolica ex-votos began in the mid-seventeenth century and continues to be significant to the local area today. I first introduce the concept of ex-votos and then trace different popular materials used in early modern Italy before turning to a closer reading of votive painting. I center attention on the case of the Madonna dei Bagni, highlighting the unique elements of this particular tradition. Another chapter focuses on the materiality of maiolica, as local meaning, knowledge, and different value aspects are embedded into these ex-votos beyond their iconographic and surface attributes. A subsequent chapter expands the concept of materiality to a broader understanding of Christian materiality, in particular the Virgin Mary and how she creates sacred space. These ideas are linked to the miraculous image of the Madonna and Child between the branches of the oak tree at the church's main altar. A further discussion addresses the role of maiolica ex-votos in the Madonna dei Bagni. I examine ramifications and implications of display and memory, looking at how ex-votos contribute to the creation and meaning of sacred space and collective memory. Ultimately, I argue that the ex-votos in this church work together to create not only sacred space, but also sacred-time-space.

Conclusions address more broadly how this particular case shapes academic understanding of contemporary devotional practices in Roman Catholicism.

Dedication

For Julia

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Introduction

It was a hot summer day in Umbria when I was first introduced to the church of the Madonna dei Bagni near the town of Deruta, Italy. While working for an artist's residency in the region in 2008, my colleague and I took a small group on a day trip to visit the tiny hill town of Deruta, a place world-renowned for its maiolica production since the Middle Ages. It is a pleasant fifteen-minute drive through farmland, vineyards and olive groves from the region's capital of Perugia to Deruta on the E45 highway headed toward Rome. The Deruta exit lands the driver right into the heartland of maiolica production on a road that runs parallel to the highway. Kilns were moved here, at the foot of the hill town, at the beginning of the twentieth century to avoid fire dangers near the old town center. Shops lining the road are filled to the brim with glimmering maiolica wares in any size and form imaginable; pitchers shaped like chickens, complete tea and dinner sets, and large decorative outdoor pots are among the countless varieties of objects to be found. We perused shops and took our group to visit one of the most prestigious maiolica workshops, Grazia Deruta. After leaving Grazia, my colleague mentioned that we should take them to "a holy place for ceramics" he knew about before heading back to the office. Hopping in the van, we traveled a few minutes down the road parallel to the main highway. We left the city limits and entered the woods before stopping at the bottom of a small hill. A flight of steps lined by carefully tended flower boxes and cypresses led up to a church

structure surrounded by old oak trees (fig. 0.1). A maiolica sign at the bottom of the hill introduced us to the church: the Madonna dei Bagni.



Fig. 0.1: Entrance to the church of the Madonna dei Bagni near Deruta, Italy.

The church interior offered a cool respite after the summer heat outside. As my eyes refocused in the shaded space, I was amazed to see whitewashed walls encrusted with hundreds of shining maiolica tiles. These were not any ordinary decorative ceramic tiles like the ones we had just seen in Deruta. Each was a little

scene painted by a local ceramic artist depicting a miracle associated with a holy image of the Madonna and Child painted on a piece of pottery and set between the branches of an oak tree at the main altar. I had seen ex-votos before, but nothing like this, and certainly never on such a large scale. The walls, the columns, even the rim of the cupola were covered in these images (fig. 0.2). Each unique tile had been set into the wall, creating a maiolica mosaic of miracles in the church's interior. As I perused the images, I saw demons expelled, individuals escaping lightning strikes, and hundreds of kneeling figures holding rosaries and praying to an image of the Madonna and Child in a tree. I discovered tiles not only from hundreds of years ago, but many from the near past depicting car or plane crashes or even representations of people in recent wars. This quickly became one of the most memorable spaces I had ever encountered in my seven years in Italy. Since this first encounter, over the years my curiosity has brought me back to study this unique space in greater detail, culminating in the research presented here.



Fig. 0.2: Interior of the Madonna dei Bagni.

One aim of this research is to address this little-studied cult of the Madonna dei Bagni near Deruta, Italy. Only two scholarly publications have been written entirely on the Madonna dei Bagni: Giulio Busti's *Gli Ex-voto in maiolica della Chiesa della Madonna dei Bagni a Casalina presso Deruta* from 1983 and Antonio Santantoni Menichelli's *Ex-voto: Arte e fede nel santuario della Madonna del Bagno* from 2010. The latter mainly repeats the scholarship from the original publication and functions as an updated catalog of the ex-votos. The essays include an art historical discussion about early maiolica masters of certain ex-votos but more in-depth scholarship on this unique tradition is needed. What is missing is not just an updated

catalog (as many tiles continue to be made and added to the church walls each year) but a more rigorous discussion about the significance of this space and its ex-votos. In this study, I discuss the Madonna dei Bagni utilizing lenses of visual studies, memory studies, and material religion to expand how we understand the value of ex-votos. I also conduct a comparative analysis with other painted votive practices to tease out and highlight particular aspects. These methods have not been used to discuss the Madonna dei Bagni, and indeed most essays tend to focus on the early modern tiles rather than the fact that this is a continuous and contemporary tradition with a long history.

A pressing reason for the discussion of the Madonna dei Bagni now is that there has been a dramatic increase of ex-voto tiles made since the second half of the twentieth century compared to the 150 years preceding it, resulting in more tiles made in the past 100 years than the previous 200 years. This reason, coupled with a dearth of scholarly sources, calls for a study of this church which is both timely and overdue. This research brings forward analyses that have not been adequately addressed in previous scholarship, such as how the materiality of ex-votos (in this case maiolica) and their modes of display (in this case permanent) affect the nature of religious devotion. Using the Madonna dei Bagni ex-votos as an anchor study, this research contributes to the larger understanding of the multilayered impact of Roman Catholic devotional practices in both personal and communal/cultural spheres.

Material religion, memory studies, and visual culture have not been used in any discussion of the case study of the Madonna dei Bagni. Furthermore, research related to votive practices tends to highlight their ephemeral nature while the Madonna dei Bagni presents a unique case in which the ex-votos are neither ephemeral nor transitory, since they are permanently displayed in the space in which they were dedicated. This case of permanent ex-votos is unique in that one may observe the ebbs and flows of ex-voto production, cult devotion and ceramic economy over several centuries. This cult's tradition and material devotion which has endured over time is a tool to understand other ex-voto traditions of ephemeral nature which fade and/or are moved from their original cult space. This research is also useful as a case study for the topics of contemporary ex-votos and the creation of sacred space in relation to time.

Studying Religion

The methodology used for this project is interdisciplinary. Ex-votos generally have been discussed by anthropologists, ethnographers, historians, historians of art, and religious studies scholars. Anthropologist and folklorist James George Frazer was important to the field of religious studies as a popular and influential author of the *The Golden Bough*.¹ Frazer addressed religion as a sort of magic that he saw as symptomatic of lower human evolutionary practices. Overall, his work today is seen as highly problematic, demonstrating Eurocentric views drawn from colonialist ideas.

¹ Frazer, James George. 1955. *The Golden Bough; A Study in Magic and Religion*. Third edition. London: Macmillan.

Approaches to religion and to science do not need to be considered as antithetical but as complementary ways humans try to make sense of the world. One way to study religious cultural production is to implement a Marxist perspective—examining religion by looking outside of religion to explain it, through a contextual lens. For example, I utilize a Marxist perspective by looking at economy and class in relation to ceramic production in Deruta. While this lens is useful and necessary, I believe, as Elaine A. Peña points out in *Performing Piety*, that, in addition to scholarship like that of Karl Marx and sociologist Émile Durkheim, we also need to consider approaches such as Rudolf Otto's who believed that religion could not be understood solely through rationality.² Only by taking in different points of view through various methodologies can we gain a better understanding of religious practices. This is particularly true in the case of the Madonna dei Bagni where hundreds of ex-votos were created for particular individuals over several centuries. It is evident that by looking outside of religion at one particular time to explain this ex-voto tradition is only one part of the story which requires further investigation through various paths.

Ex-votos

The term ex-voto stems from the Latin *ex voto suscepto*, translating to “out of the vow made.” Ex-votos appear globally across different traditions and time periods with examples ranging from Japanese *ema* tablets to Mexican *retablos* to Italian

² Peña, Elaine A. 2011. *Performing Piety: Making Space Sacred with the Virgin of Guadalupe*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 148. Referencing Rudolf Otto. 1950. *The Idea of the Holy*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

tavolette.³ Votive practices can even be traced to the ancient world of the Mediterranean, a notable monumental example being the *Winged Victory of Samothrace* from ancient Greece that was dedicated in thanks for victory in a naval battle. Other types of votive offerings from the ancient Greek world included ceramic body parts or animals as well as narrative ex-votos on sculpted relief panels. Originally painted, these panels show the devoted and the divinity interacting—a lasting narrative testament to a healing received.⁴ The use of ex-votos continued in the classical world with the ancient Romans, who, as archaeological evidence attests, left votive objects made from ceramic, wax, and metal.⁵ Christianity developed alongside these votive cultures. As a result, early Christians adopted, or perhaps more realistically *continued* votive practices growing out of these traditions. Within Roman Catholicism, ex-votos have been known to function as a type of divine currency—similar to a receipt for graces requested or granted. It is not uncommon for ex-votos to be labelled as such: *ex voto*, *ex voto suscepto*, *per grazia ricevuta* (or *PGR*), and *Voto Fatto Grazia Ricevuta* (or *VFGR*) are often inscribed on objects or paintings,

³ *Ema* tablets, *retablos* and *tavolette* are all forms of votive paintings across various geographies and time periods. For a discussion of a variety of votive paintings see: Weinryb, Ittai, ed. 2016. *Ex Voto: Votive Giving across Cultures*. New York City: Bard Graduate Center.

⁴ These have been discussed in detail by Alexia Petsalis-Diomidis in “Between the Body and the Divine: Healing Votives from Classical and Hellenistic Greece” in *Ex Voto: Votive Giving Across Cultures*, Ittai Weinryb, ed.: 49-75.

⁵ For more on Roman ex-votos see: Jessica Hughes. 2016. “Fractured Narratives: Writing the Biography of a Votive Offering” in *Ex Voto: Votive Giving Across Cultures*,. Ittai Weinryb, ed.: 23-48; Verity Platt. 2016. “Clever Devices and Cognitive Artifacts: Votive Giving in the Ancient World” in *Agents of Faith*, Ittai Weinryb, ed.: 141-157; F.T. Van Straten. 1981. “Gifts for the Gods” in *Faith, Hope, and Worship: Aspects of Religious Mentality in the Ancient World*, H.S. Versnel, ed.: 65-151; G. Bartolini, G. Colonna, and C. Grottanelli, eds., 1989-1990. *Regime delle offerte e vita dei santuari nel mediterraneo antico*, Rome: Università degli Studi a Roma “La Sapienza”.

especially in the Italian context.⁶ However, votives can be literally anything and are dependent on the intentions of the giver for their signification. Hugo van der Velden discusses votives in *The Donor's Image* by categorizing them into two types.⁷ The first, *donativo pro anima* (or *pro remedio animae*), means an act of giving for the sake of the soul to secure future salvation. The second, *per grazia ricevuta*, means giving for intercessory grace or in fulfillment of a promise or vow. Although some ex-votos like a body part in silver or wax can be left in request for a prayer to be answered *or* in thanks for a grace received, most narrative painted ex-votos, which are the focus of this study, depict the latter.

Ex-votos only gained attention by scholars in the twentieth century. Particular interest in wax votives was initially addressed by Julius von Schlosser's *History of Portraiture in Wax* and Aby Warburg's *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*.⁸ Meanwhile Christian ex-votos in general were discussed by Lenz Kriss-Rettenbeck in *Ex Voto: Zeichenm Bild und Abbild im christlichen Votivbrauchum*.⁹ In recent years, ex-votos have been the topic of the exhibition *Agents of Faith* and accompanying publications

⁶ These translate to “out of the vow”, “out of the vow made”, “for the grace received”, “vow made, grace received”.

⁷ Velden, Hugo van der. 2000. *The Donor's Image: Gerard Loyet and the Votive Portraits of Charles the Bold*. Turnhout: Brepols, 203.

⁸ Panzanelli, Roberta, and Julius von Schlosser. 2008. *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure*. Los Angeles, Calif: Getty Research Institute, 171-303. Warburg, Aby. 1999. *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*. Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities.

⁹ Kriss-Rettenbeck, Lenz. 1972. *Ex Voto: Zeichen, Bild Und Abbild Im Christlichen Votivbrauchum*. Zürich Freiburg i. Br: Atlantis-Verlag.

at the Bard Graduate Center in New York City.¹⁰ Curator and publication editor Ittai Weinryb has brought together various cultures and methodologies in these publications in order to gain a wider understanding of the phenomena of votive giving. Among the scholars who contributed to these publications I look to Michele Bacci, who addresses the history of painted Italian ex-votos, and Megan Holmes who addresses Renaissance perspectives of votive practices.¹¹ Fredrika Jacobs' essay discusses Italian ex-votos as objects in need of conservation and display in the space of the church.¹² This connects to ideas of ephemerality and materiality discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation.

Mary Laven's "Recording Miracles in Renaissance Italy" as well as Jane Garnett and Gervase Rosser's *Spectacular Miracles* specifically discuss ex-votos in Italy.¹³ The latter publication also addresses miraculous images and community with a particular emphasis in the city of Genoa and the surrounding area. Garnett and Rosser look at ideas of space and time in relation to miraculous images—something I also aim to do in my own research. However, my dissertation will focus on one

¹⁰ Weinryb, Ittai. 2018. *Agents of Faith: Votive Objects in Time and Place*. New York: Bard Graduate Center Gallery; and Weinryb, Ittai. 2016. *Ex Voto: Votive Giving Across Cultures*. New York, New York: Bard Graduate Center.

¹¹ Bacci, Michele. 2016. "Italian Ex-Votos and 'Pro-Anima' Images in the Late Middle Ages" in *Ex Voto*. New York, New York: Bard Graduate Center; and Holmes, Megan. 2016. "Renaissance Perspectives on Classical Antique Votive Practices" in *Ex Voto*. New York, New York: Bard Graduate Center.

¹² Jacobs, Fredrika. 2016. "Humble Offerings: Votive Panel Paintings in Renaissance Italy" in *Ex Voto*. New York, New York: Bard Graduate Center.

¹³ Laven, Mary. 2016. "Recording Miracles in Renaissance Italy." *Past & Present* 230 (suppl 11): 191–212. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtw026>; and Garnett, Jane, and Gervase Rosser. 2013. *Spectacular Miracles: Transforming Images in Italy from the Renaissance to the Present*. London: Reaktion Books.

particular cult over time, and the emphasis will be focused on the ex-votos and their relationship to the cult image, space, time, people, and so on.

Caroline Walker Bynum addresses original medieval ideas of materiality in *Christian Materiality*.¹⁴ In the Madonna dei Bagni, I ask not only how the original makers of the ex-votos thought about the materiality of their creations, but also how that perspective has shifted and evolved over time, continuing in the present. The materiality of ex-votos in particular has been discussed by several scholars including Georges Didi-Huberman's "Image, Organ, Time", Mary Laven's "Wax Versus Wood: The Material of Votive Offerings in Renaissance Italy" and Maria Alessandra Chessa's "The Substance of Divine Grace: Ex-votos and the Material of Paper in Early Modern Italy".¹⁵ Materiality of ex-votos, specifically the *tavolette* of early modern Italy have been discussed by Fredrika Jacobs.¹⁶ Previous discussions of materiality of ex-votos have focused strongly on their inherent ephemerality. This does not apply to the ceramic ex-votos in the Madonna dei Bagni. Endurance through time, I believe, is a particular motivation for the use of this type of material, which

¹⁴ Bynum, Caroline Walker. 2011. *Christian Materiality: an Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe*. New York: Zone Books.

¹⁵ Didi-Huberman, Georges, and Gerald Moore. 2007. "Ex-Voto: Image, Organ, Time." *L'Esprit Créateur* 47 (3): 7–16. <https://doi.org/10.1353/esp.2007.0057>; Laven, Mary. 2019. "Wax Versus Wood: The Material of Votive Offerings in Renaissance Italy" in *Religious Materiality in the Early Modern World* The Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvx8b72t.7>; Chessa, Maria Alessandra. 2019. "The Substance of Divine Grace: Ex-Votos and the Material of Paper in Early Modern Italy" in *Religious Materiality in the Early Modern World*. The Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvx8b72t.8>.

¹⁶ Jacobs, Fredrika. 2013. *Votive Panels and Popular Piety in Early Modern Italy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

changes the discussion entirely. To my knowledge, there has not been any scholarship on the materiality of maiolica ex-votos.

In order to unpack the materiality of maiolica, I investigate primary documents from the early modern period such as Cipriano Piccolopasso's *Three Books of the Potter's Art*.¹⁷ I also take into consideration other ceramic traditions from the time, including della Robbia works produced in Tuscany. I look not only to historical ways of making, but also to contemporary modes of maiolica creation through hands-on research conducted at the Scuola d'arte ceramica Romano Ranieri in Deruta. Through these methodologies, I aim to promote a holistic understanding about maiolica ex-voto production across time.

Agency and Power of Images

One constant element in the ex-voto tradition of Deruta is the cult image at the Madonna dei Bagni—a maiolica depiction of the Virgin and Child painted on a small cup placed between the branches of a tree, today encased at the main altar of the church. This image is replicated on every ex-voto in the church. Here I look to scholarship on agency and power of such religious images. Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency* discusses certain objects which are endowed with sentience, power or agency to work as “social agents”.¹⁸ His ideas can be applied to the Madonna dei Bagni.

¹⁷ Piccolopasso, Cipriano, R. W. Lightbown, and Alan. Caiger-Smith. 1980. *The Three Books of the Potter's Art, I Tre Libri Dell'arte Del Vasaio: a Facsimile of the Manuscript in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London*. Edited by R. W. Lightbown and Alan. Caiger-Smith. London: Scolar Press.

¹⁸ Gell, Alfred. 1998. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

David Freedberg's *The Power of Images* focuses on this power as being rooted in the understanding of the human psychological response to images.¹⁹ In his interpretation, images “work” because of a certain societal understanding that they work—a collective memory and community consensus. While I do draw on theories related to individual and collective memory, I would point out that I agree with the statement made by the editors of *Presence: The Inherence of the Prototype within Images and Other Objects*, who suggest that the way to go beyond Freedberg's analysis is through “detailed and fully contextualized studies of individual cases”, which is precisely what I intend to do in this dissertation.²⁰

In a chapter dedicated to ex-votos, Freedberg briefly discusses the ex-votos in the Madonna dei Bagni. He addresses ex-votos as images that have power as contracts between humans and a deity. However, Freedberg is still operating in a high/low art binary in which these “humble” objects are set aside in favor of more technically skilled works. Although it is refreshing to see scholarship looking at this case study, I challenge the high/low art dichotomy, which does not fully support the importance of this cult. Moreover, in the case of the Madonna dei Bagni, both the cult image and the ex-votos are of the same medium—painted maiolica— further flattening any kind of distinction between high/low art materials. In my scholarship I focus more on the socio-cultural religious function of these objects rather than

¹⁹ Freedberg, David. 1989. *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

²⁰ Shepherd, Rupert, and Robert Maniura. 2006. *Presence: the Inherence of the Prototype Within Images and Other Objects*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 6.

distinctions between high/low art forms, although I would also point out that locals from Deruta refer to their maiolica production as “art,” a distinction I honor in my research. What can the material of these artworks tell us? How is knowledge of ceramic-making, of the land and the local environment, of community practices, artisanal skills and religious devotion embedded into these votive objects?

Sacred Space

In recent years, art historian Alexei Lidov has pioneered a new area of art historical research, which he terms hierotopy, or the study of sacred space. Lidov argues that sacred space is not merely made up of the building or artworks inside of it but is an amalgamation of these things in addition to the scents, tastes and performative actions which surround them. In my research, I look at the Madonna dei Bagni through the lens of hierotopy. First, I consider the cult image of the Virgin Mary as a creator of sacred space, and then I look at the surrounding performative actions with focused interest on the dedication of maiolica ex-votos.

The creation of sacred space in relation to the Virgin Mary has been addressed via site-specific research. Examples include Hans Belting’s review of miraculous images in Rome in *Likeness and Presence*; Megan Holmes’ *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence*; and Jane Garnett and Gervase Rosser’s *Spectacular Miracles* which addresses miraculous images in the Genoese tradition.²¹ In my work, I also

²¹ Belting, Hans, and E. F. N. Jephcott. 1994. *Likeness and Presence: a History of the Image before the Era of Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Holmes, Megan. 2013. *The Miraculous Image in*

look at the creation of sacred space via the Virgin Mary, but am focused on the tradition of one specific church. Historian William Christian investigates historical documentation relating to the formation of cults related to the Virgin Mary. I utilize this methodology when addressing the Madonna dei Bagni and looking at ideas about space-claiming.²² I also look to anthropologists Turner and Turner and their methodology when discussing a pilgrimage site.²³

Jas Elsner's "Place Shrine Miracle" in *Agents of Faith* discusses ex-votos at a shrine in their collective significance as well as their power in the creation of sacred space.²⁴ I approach these topics in a similar way in the case study of the Madonna dei Bagni. David Morgan in *The Thing About Religion*, focuses closely on materiality and agency in relation to religion.²⁵ In a chapter dedicated to Notre Dame de Paris, Morgan approaches the understanding of the materiality of religions by looking at a particular place through time and the new meanings and forms of agency that appear over that time. This aligns with my aims in discussing one building, the church of the Madonna dei Bagni, over time—tracing not only how meaning is made but how it changes. Jessica Hughes' chapter in *Ex Voto* "Fractured narratives: Writing the

Renaissance Florence. New Haven: Yale University Press; Garnett, Jane, and Gervase Rosser. 2013. *Spectacular Miracles: Transforming Images in Italy from the Renaissance to the Present*. London: Reaktion Books.

²² Christian, William A. 1981. *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press; and Christian, William A. 1981. *Apparitions in Late Medieval and Renaissance Spain*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

²³ Turner, Victor W., and Edith L. B. Turner. 1978. *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*. New York: Columbia University Press.

²⁴ Elsner, Jas. 2018. "Place Shrine Miracle" in *Agents of Faith: Votive Objects in Time and Place*. Ittai Weinryb, ed.. New York: Bard Graduate Center Gallery.

²⁵ Morgan, David. 2021. *The Thing About Religion: An Introduction to the Material Study of Religions*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

Biography of a Votive Offering” discusses how the meaning of an ex-voto changes depending on context.²⁶ The lives of the ex-votos in the Madonna dei Bagni have been, in recent history at least, permanently tied to a particular place. I follow her ideas about developing a biography of an ex-voto but in a singular space—in relationship to other ex-votos that form a continuously growing body of material.

Time

In *The Confessions*, Saint Augustine does not attempt to define time, but instead explores aspects of it.²⁷ Defining time is likewise beyond the scope of this dissertation, but, like Saint Augustine, I seek to elaborate on different aspects of it. While sociologist Émile Durkheim briefly mentions time in relation to the sacred and the profane in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, the idea of sacred time has only been expanded upon in recent years.²⁸ Building upon Lidov’s concept of hierotopy, Byzantinist Maria Evangelatou expands this concept to include time with her term hierochronotopy.²⁹ In her work, she identifies timefulness, a term coined by Mayanist Diana Rose.³⁰ Timefulness is used by Evangelatou to describe aspects of

²⁶ Hughes, Jessica. 2016. “Fractured Narratives: Writing the Biography of a Votive Offering” in *Ex Voto*. Ittai Weinryb, ed.. United States: Bard Graduate Center, Exhibitions Department.

²⁷ Augustine, and E. B. Pusey. 1921. *The Confessions of St. Augustine*. Waiheke Island: The Floating Press.

²⁸ Durkheim, Émile. 2016. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Dinslaken: Anboco.

²⁹ Evangelatou, Maria. 2021. “Hierochronotopy: Stepping into timeful space through Bonnano’s twelfth-century door for the Pisa cathedral” in *Icons of Space : Advances in Hierotopy*. Jelena Bogdanović, ed.. London ; Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 134-172.

³⁰ Rose, Diana. 2017. “Living Time, Performing Memory: Maya Ceremonies of Foundation and Renewal”, PhD Dissertation in Visual Studies at the UC Santa Cruz, viii.

sacred time. In my research, I look at the Madonna dei Bagni as a hierochronotopic case study: a sacred space which amplifies notions of sacred timefulness.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter 1 introduces the concept of ex-votos and traces different popular materials used in Italy before turning to a closer reading of votive painting in Italy. Following this, the case of the Madonna dei Bagni is introduced, highlighting the unique elements of this particular tradition. Chapter 2 focuses in particular on the materiality of maiolica. I discuss both past and contemporary ways of making the maiolica ex-voto tiles in the Madonna dei Bagni and how meaning, knowledge and value of different types are embedded into them. Chapter 3 expands the concept of materiality to a broader understanding of Christian materiality, in particular the Virgin Mary and how she creates sacred space. These ideas are linked to the miraculous image of the Madonna and Child between the branches of the oak tree at the main altar of the church of the Madonna dei Bagni. Chapter 4 expands the discussion of the creation of sacred space by addressing the role of maiolica ex-votos in the Madonna dei Bagni. In this chapter I examine ramifications and implications of display and memory, looking at how ex-votos contribute to the creation and meaning of sacred space and collective memory. Conclusions explore the making of sacred-time-space at the Madonna dei Bagni. In the concluding chapter I contextualize the Madonna dei Bagni within a network of devotional practices in Roman Catholicism worldwide.

Although this dissertation focuses on the specific case study of the Madonna dei Bagni, it aims to contribute to a larger body of work discussing material religion. This research can be used in application towards the understanding of ex-votos and/or other types of devotional practices in relation to sacred space and time in Roman Catholicism. The goal of this study is to broaden understanding of ex-voto practices, not only as ephemeral spiritually-charged objects, but in other terms—objects which create sacred space, create a sense of communal memory, and which may even articulate an expansive understanding of place and time.

Chapter 1

Ex-votos in Italy and the special case of the Madonna dei Bagni



Fig. 1.1 Street shrine with ex-votos in Trastevere, Rome.

Introduction

Next to a bus stop in the ancient Trastevere neighborhood in Rome is a small shrine to the Madonna set into a street-side wall (fig. 1.1). A sky-blue arch demarcates the sacred space of the haloed bas-relief Madonna with hands clasped in prayer. Small notes scribbled on paper are piled up on the ledge around her: prayers from passers-by. Affixed to the wall surrounding the Madonna are dozens of marble and ceramic plaques with short inscriptions, some with a name and date, many with the letters “PGR” (an acronym for *per grazia ricevuta*, meaning “for the grace received”) and others simply labelled with “Grazie”—thank you. These are ex-votos, testaments to

prayers that were answered by this Madonna. Ex-votos left in thanks for answered prayers or miracles received from on high are not unique to this street shrine but appear in nearly every church in Italy. Often, they manifest as elaborately filigreed silver hearts, figures of people or body parts, animals, or other objects lining the walls near a sacred image, tomb, or reliquary. Other times, ex-votos appear as pink or blue ribbons left in celebration for the birth of a child, a wedding bouquet in thanks for a marriage, a crutch giving thanks for a healing, and even a motorcycle helmet in appreciation for salvation from an accident. These votive offerings are extremely personal and can be made of anything the giver sees fit.

This shrine in Trastevere is just one of countless examples of shrines across Italy that have occasioned the crafting of ex-votos, from the hand-written and poorly fashioned to the highly skilled and professionally produced. In order to better understand the Madonna dei Bagni's special place in Italy's network of shrines, a discussion of the background and context of the Italian tradition of ex-votos is required. This chapter will introduce ex-votos with a focus on the Italian tradition spanning the early modern period to present day, followed by the introduction to the tradition at the church of the Madonna dei Bagni near Deruta, Italy. In this study, I focus on Italy in particular because it provides a number of examples of votive traditions that began in historic times and continue to be practiced today. While much research has been dedicated to exploring historical practices of ex-voto giving which no longer continue today, my research focuses on both the historical and contemporary components of ex-voto practices across time. Through a comparison of

other forms of votive giving in this chapter, I will argue that the Madonna dei Bagni is a unique case which can be unpacked through further analysis of its materiality, cult image, ex-voto display, and portrayal of sacred time which will be the subjects of subsequent chapters.

Popular Material Choices for Ex-Votos in Italy from the Early Modern Period to Present Day



Fig. 1.2. Tabernacle of the Annunziata, Church of the Santissima Annunziata, Florence.

When entering the Basilica of the Santissima Annunziata in Florence today, visitors see the fifteenth-century Tabernacle of the Annunziata by Michelozzo to their immediate left (fig. 1.2). On the wall under this tabernacle is a fresco depicting the Annunciation of the Angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary. The face of the Virgin was believed by the devout to have been completed by an angel in 1252 (although the image likely dates to c.1340) after which it purportedly began to work miracles.³¹ Today material evidence of these miracles is manifested mainly as elaborate silver lamps and candlesticks lit with glowing candles surrounding the image, as well as silver hearts arranged in orderly frames on the walls around it. In addition to these more permanent votive fixtures, wedding bouquets are periodically left at the tabernacle by recent brides— however these are habitually swept away in order to prevent the buildup of clutter in the sacred space. This is an impressive display of devotion by any measure, yet, in 1630 the church of Santissima Annunziata had a much grander display of votive giving as it was considered one of the most popular centers for Marian devotion on the Italian peninsula. It was recorded as containing an estimated total of 26,000 ex-votos comprised of 600 life-size votive effigies, 22,000 papier-mâché votives, and 3,600 painted *tavolette* dedicated to the Virgin.³² These ex-votos, along with other forms including large metal lamps, large military gear and

³¹ Borsook, Eve. 1997. *The Companion Guide to Florence*. 6th rev. ed. Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Companion Guides, 213.

³² Andreucci, Ottavio. 1857 [i.e. 1858], 1858 *Il fiorentino istruito nella Chiesa della Nunziata di Firenze; memoria storica del Segretario Ottavio Andreucci*. Italy: M. Cellini, 88.

other items, had been crowding the shrine for hundreds of years.³³ Various attempts at organizing or limiting dedications had been unsuccessful. An atrium was filled with life-size wax effigies, while others were hung alongside papier-mâché votives from the rafters and *tavolette* lined every other possible inch of wall space including pillars and rods. Additionally, in an attempt to create greater legibility and to conform to Counter-Reformation ideas about images and display, thirty oil paintings on canvas depicting important miracles were commissioned to be exhibited in an orderly fashion on particular holy days.³⁴ What does the materiality of these various votive options tell us? The case of the Santissima Annunziata serves as an anchor to the discussion of diverse ex-voto forms, their meaning, and their historical development. The following subsections will address silver, wax, paper and painted ex-votos in greater detail.

³³ Matthews-Grieco, Sara F. 2009. "Media, Memory and the Miracoli Della SS. Annunziata 1." *Word & Image (London. 1985)* 25 (3): 272–92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02666280802489970>. 278.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 279-280.

Silver



Figs. 1.3 and 1.4. Silver ex-votos at the church of the Madonna della Milicia, Palermo.

Silver ex-votos gained popularity in the fourteenth century and continue to be a favored choice today.³⁵ It is common today to find embossed silver votives in the shape of hearts, arms, legs, heads, torsos, breasts, eyes, full bodies and other anatomical parts in shrines across Italy and they appear in many votive traditions worldwide (figs. 1.3 and 1.4).³⁶ Although silver has been used at least since the late Middle Ages, not many medieval or early modern examples exist today. A reason for their disappearance has to do with their monetary value—they were often liquidated

³⁵ See Wagle, Kate. 1998. "Vernacular of the Sacred: Laminae Ex Voto in Southern Italy" in *Metalsmith* 18 (2): 28–37.

³⁶ See Girard, Alexander., and Doris Francis. 2007. *Faith and Transformation: Votive Offerings and Amulets from the Alexander Girard Collection*. Santa Fe: Museum of International Folk Art, Museum of New Mexico Press.

by clergy in times of financial need. The church of the Madonna della Quercia near Viterbo has a collection of early modern silver votives which include not only the types mentioned above but also kneeling votaries, and depictions of the cult image of the Madonna and Child in the oak tree. To make them, images were cut out of a sheet of thin silver, then carefully hand-punched to create intricate designs. Today these types of ex-votos can be made in much the same way but are often mass-produced by machine. Motives for leaving this type of votive might be to show the depth of gratitude of the giver in monetary value, to enhance the prestige of the shrine by decorating it in a precious metal, or to contribute to the wealth of the shrine. Whatever the motives may be, silver ex-votos, particularly those in the shape of hearts and bodily parts, are the most common type of ex-voto found in shrines and sanctuaries in Italy today.

Wax



Fig. 1.5. Wax ex-votos at the church of the Madonna della Milicia, Palermo.

Wax ex-votos have perhaps garnered the most attention from scholars.³⁷ Wax can also appear in a variety of different forms: as a mass in a symbolic weight or size of the devotee, a candle, a portrait bust or effigy, or in the shape of an ailing body part (fig. 1.5). While effigies in the early modern period were carefully crafted and even acknowledged for their artistic beauty by Giorgio Vasari, body parts and candles were serially produced and sold at local apothecaries.³⁸ It may have been this ease of availability and affordability which contributed to wax being a popular choice.

It is also worth noting that the medium of wax for votive offerings is something that had been around since antiquity.³⁹ The votive practices of the Romans continued at the onset of Christianity and throughout the Middle Ages, becoming particularly widespread in the thirteenth through the fourteenth centuries.⁴⁰ Although Church authorities sought to discourage practices connected with pagan rituals—including the offering of wax votives at shrines—this practice continued into the early

³⁷ See Didi-Huberman, Georges and Gerald Moore. 2007. “Ex-Voto: Image, Organ, Time.” *L’Esprit Créateur* 47 (3): 7–16. <https://doi.org/10.1353/esp.2007.0057>; Holmes, Megan. 2009. “Ex-votos: Materiality, Memory, and Cult” in *The Idol in the Age of Art: Objects, Devotions and the Early Modern World*. Edited by Michael Wayne Cole and Rebecca Zorach. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Co.; Laven, Mary. 2019. “Wax Versus Wood: The Material of Votive Offerings in Renaissance Italy” in *Religious Materiality in the Early Modern World*, United States: Amsterdam University Press, 35–50.; Panzanelli, Roberta and Julius von Schlosser. 2008. *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure*. Los Angeles, Calif: Getty Research Institute; and Warburg, Aby. 1999. *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*. Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities.

³⁸ “The results of this skillful work were so natural that the wax figures seemed to be real and alive...” Vasari, Giorgio. 1965. *The Lives of the Artists, Vol. 1*. London: Penguin. 239–240.

³⁹ See Panzanelli, Roberta, and Julius von Schlosser. 2008. *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure*. Los Angeles, Calif: Getty Research Institute, 226.

⁴⁰ Holmes, Megan. 2009. “Ex-votos: Materiality, Memory, and Cult” in *The Idol in the Age of Art: Objects, Devotions and the Early Modern World*. Edited by Michael Wayne Cole and Rebecca Zorach. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Co, 159–181.

modern period and indeed still continues to be practiced today at Roman Catholic sites around the world.⁴¹ Although examples of medieval wax votives have not survived to present day, we can see evidence of their popularity through more durable mediums such as the fourteenth-century stained-glass window of a pilgrim leaving a votive leg at the shrine of Saint William in York, where other wax votive body parts hang from a pole suspended next to the tomb of the saint.⁴² Another example comes from the Saint Margaret altarpiece by the school of Turino Vanni dating to circa 1400.⁴³ One vignette of the life of Saint Margaret depicts pilgrims at her tomb, above which appears a rod with various wax votive body parts, much like the stained-glass representation of the tomb of Saint William. These examples show the proliferation of this type of votive across the European continent in the Middle Ages. The popularity of wax continues today both in Italy and at other popular European shrines such as Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal.⁴⁴

How might we understand the allure of wax across space and time? Scholars such as philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman have noted that one of the primary reasons for wax's appeal is its mimetic quality—specifically its resemblance to human flesh.⁴⁵ Wax has the ability to be molded in the likeness of an

⁴¹ Weinryb, Ittai. 2016. *Ex Voto: Votive Giving Across Cultures*. Edited by Ittai Weinryb. New York, New York: Bard Graduate Center, 8-9.

⁴² *Ibid*, 11.

⁴³ Jacobs, Fredrika. 2016. "Humble Offerings" in *Ex Voto: Votive Giving Across Cultures*. Edited by Ittai Weinryb. New York, [New York: Bard Graduate Center, 145.

⁴⁴ Weinryb, Ittai. 2018. *Agents of Faith: Votive Objects in Time and Place*. Edited by Ittai Weinryb. New York: Bard Graduate Center Gallery, 33.

⁴⁵ Didi-Huberman, Georges and Gerald Moore. 2007. "Ex-Voto: Image, Organ, Time." *L'Esprit Créateur* 47 (3): 7–16. <https://doi.org/10.1353/esp.2007.0057>

ailing body part, which, when set in front of a holy image, tomb or relic, would stand in for the devotee; even in their physical absence, the ex-voto would evoke their presence, requesting help or giving thanks for healing. The devoted could attain an even higher degree of presence through wax portrait effigies, such as those documented in the hundreds at the Santissima Annunziata. In this case, hundreds of grateful believers permanently placed themselves in front of the miraculous image of the Virgin.

Due to the ephemeral nature of the medium, this placement was only semi-permanent: eventually these effigies in the Santissima Annunziata began to collapse in on themselves and fall apart.⁴⁶ Wax, like flesh, inevitably decays over time. It is prone to melting and falling apart, or in the case of candles, burns and disappears. Unlike precious metals, which could last centuries before the altar, wax was impermanent. It was also much more affordable and thus available to a larger number of devotees. In addition, affordability made wax a humble material. This quality may

⁴⁶ Portrait effigies in the Santissima Annunziata in Florence began to amass during the first half of the fifteenth century. Although for a time they were periodically cleaned, restored and remade most were cleared away by the seventeenth century, and all had disappeared by the end of the eighteenth century. An example of what these may have looked like can be seen in the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie outside of Mantova, which is decorated both with wax bodily parts as well as life-size mixed-media votive effigies. The wax bodily parts were made in the sixteenth century by a Franciscan friar who took older wax ex-votos, melted them down and then, using eleven molds created hundreds of uniform bodily parts which were used to decorate the shrine. These remade wax ex-votos were and are seen as secondary to the life-size effigies displayed in niches throughout the space. For a discussion of this space see Megan Holmes. 2009. "Ex-votos: Materiality, Memory, and Cult" in *The Idol in the Age of Art: Objects, Devotions and the Early Modern World*. Edited by Michael Wayne Cole and Rebecca Zorach. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub. Co.

have appealed to some devotees who wished to align themselves with that virtue.⁴⁷ While gifts of silver and gold may underscore great gratitude, they may also demonstrate pride that comes with riches. Offering a votive of humble quality and ephemeral nature could demonstrate the pious nature of the giver. It is the multivalence of wax that made it a compelling choice for ex-votos.

Paper

While wax has been the subject of much scholarly attention, paper by contrast has received very little. None of the staggering 22,000 papier-mâché (or *cartapesta* as it is known in Italian) votives hanging in the Santissima Annunziata survive today. However, in the sanctuary of Romituzzo, near Siena, 5,000 are still extant hanging in situ dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁴⁸ These votives—composed of various bodily parts—offer a wonderful opportunity to study this particular medium. The fact that they have managed to survive today may have to do with the shrine’s proximity to Colle Val’Elsa, which was a center for paper production at the time.⁴⁹ As such, paper would have been a material closely associated with the community whose citizenry would have been motivated to take extra care in preserving its use in religious devotion. What is striking about paper ex-votos is the

⁴⁷ Laven, Mary. 2019. “Wax Versus Wood: The Material of Votive Offerings in Renaissance Italy” in *Religious Materiality in the Early Modern World*. United States: Amsterdam University Press, 35-50.

⁴⁸ Chessa, Maria Alessandra. 2019. “The Substance of Divine Grace: Ex-Votos and the Material of Paper in Early Modern Italy” in *Religious Materiality in the Early Modern World*. United States: Amsterdam University Press, 51-66.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 55.

process involved in their creation. At the time of the production of these examples at Romituzzo, paper was made from rags. Rags generally consisted of used clothing—material which held significance because it had been close to the bodies of the community members—which were then transformed into ex-votos. Cloth which was in touch with bodies of devotees was then transformed into paper ex-votos that represent those same bodies in the sanctuary where they give thanks and receive graces as an “extension” of those actual bodies. This process is what historian Maria Alessandra Chessa labels “redemption in tangible form.”⁵⁰ It is worth noting that textiles at the time were associated with flesh, which would have made papier-mâché an even more appropriate material to represent bodily parts.⁵¹

This close association with the body of the devotee is heightened since papier-mâché allows the maker to reproduce a body part by taking an actual mold from a votary’s body. The process then involves painting on the finished object to create further meaning. The significance of paper ex-votos lies in not only what they are made from (rags from the community), how they are made (the process of casting and painting), but also how they were experienced (displayed in the church sanctuary as an assemblage).⁵² It is important to keep in mind that ex-votos generally create meaning as individual objects as well as part of a collection or body of objects.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 62.

⁵¹ Brown, Katherine T. 2017. *Mary of Mercy in Medieval and Renaissance Italian Art: Devotional Image and Civic Emblem*. London; Routledge, 48.

⁵² Chessa, Maria Alessandra. 2019. “The Substance of Divine Grace: Ex-Votos and the Material of Paper in Early Modern Italy” in *Religious Materiality in the Early Modern World*. United States: Amsterdam University Press, 64.

Painting

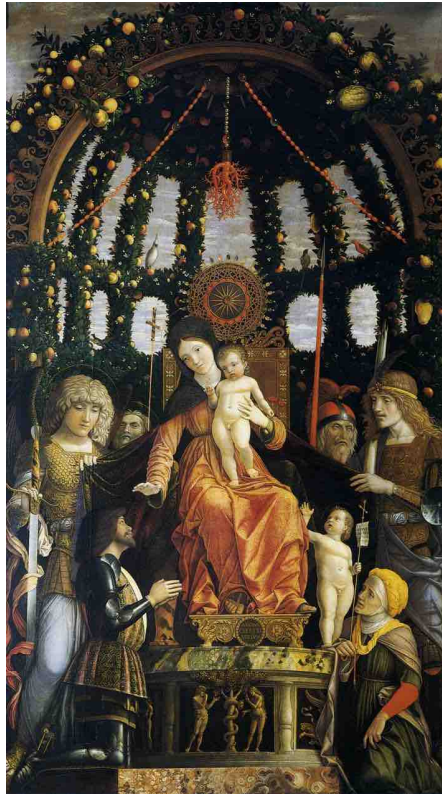


Fig. 1.6. Andrea Mantegna, *Madonna della Vittoria*, tempera on canvas, 1496. Musée du Louvre, Paris. Artwork in the public domain. Photo credit: <https://www.wga.hu/html/m/mantegna/09/6victory.html>

Paint itself is an ex-voto material that requires an extended discussion. This is due to the fact that it can be categorized as either ex-voto and/or a more general religious painting. Prior to the end of the fifteenth century, votive paintings in the Roman Catholic tradition in Italy were usually not explicitly labelled by devotees as ex-votos and it was therefore more difficult to decipher their original function unless otherwise documented. One clue to a painting's function is the inclusion of a kneeling donor portrait. Although the reason for the inclusion of a donor portrait in most cases has

been lost to time, they may function as an ex-voto or indicate thanks in more generalized terms. In these cases, donor portraits may even appear vague on purpose as a sign of humility: they may be an overarching reference to piety—the focus being on the connection of the devotee to the holy rather than an emphasis on a particular person’s identity. One might also consider that a more vague representation could also emphasize perpetual devotion and protection.

Monumental painted altarpieces with donor portraits, for example, could be categorized as ex-votos. One example is Andrea Mantegna’s *Madonna della Vittoria* which was commissioned by Francesco II Gonzaga in thanks for victory in battle in 1496 (fig. 1.6). Upon first inspection, this altarpiece appears to be just an elaborate *sacra conversazione* with a Madonna and Child enthroned and surrounded by saints. They are placed in a garden-like apse decorated with fruit and blooming vegetation upon which a variety of birds perch. The garden theme is echoed in the base upon which the Madonna and Child are seated; it depicts a scene of the Temptation of Adam and Eve with the Serpent in the Garden of Eden. This imagery accounts for the fall of man and the reason for Christ’s birth. However, the inclusion of the donor portrait of Francesco II Gonzaga is a clue to the further meaning of this work beyond the above theological implications. Gonzaga is dressed as a soldier kneeling at the foot of the Madonna. She leans toward him, making a gesture of bestowing a grace upon him. We know from historical records that this is more than a donor portrait—it is an ex-voto, a painting commissioned as a vow in thanks for a particular grace received; in this case it was victory in battle, as suggested by the armor he wears.



Fig. 1.7. Attributed to Antonio Orsini. *Ex-voto to Saint Francis of Assisi*, tempera on panel, 1432. Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris. Image sourced from Ittai Weinryb. 2018. *Agents of Faith : Votive Objects in Time and Place*. Edited by Ittai Weinryb. New York: Bard Graduate Center Gallery, xiii.

According to art historian Michele Bacci, the earliest *recorded* ex-voto painting to state that it is an ex-voto in an inscription is the now-lost panel of the Blessed Gregorio Celli in Rimini Cathedral dating to 1380.⁵³ Art historian Fredrika Jacobs claims that the earliest *surviving* documented painted panel ex-voto dates to 1432.⁵⁴ Attributed to Antonio Orsini, this high-quality painting depicts Saint Francis of Assisi receiving the stigmata while a Ferrarese nun, Sister Sara, kneels before him (fig. 1.7). In the middle of the painting a cartouche holds a description of the events while on the right-hand side of the painting two knights embrace, embodying

⁵³ Bacci, Michele. 2016. "Italian Ex-Votos and 'Pro-Anima' Images in the Late Middle Ages" in *Ex Voto*. Bard Graduate Center, 87.

⁵⁴ Today housed in the Musée des Arts Decorative in Paris. Fredrika Jacobs. 2016. "Five. Humble Offerings: Votive Panel Paintings in Renaissance Italy" in *Ex Voto*. United States: Bard Graduate Center, Exhibitions Department, 159. Weinryb, Ittai. 2018. *Agents of Faith: Votive Objects in Time and Place*. Edited by Ittai Weinryb. New York: Bard Graduate Center Gallery, xii-xiii.

harmony after an altercation. The description notes that Sister Sara had prayed to Saint Francis to prevent violence. Her prayers were answered, and the painting was commissioned in thanks for the grace received. The painting is crafted with vivid details—including rock formations and dense forests in the background as well as flowering vegetation surrounding the main scenes. This demonstrates an example of a fine quality ex-voto painting, in contrast to lower-quality *tavolette* which emerged several decades later.

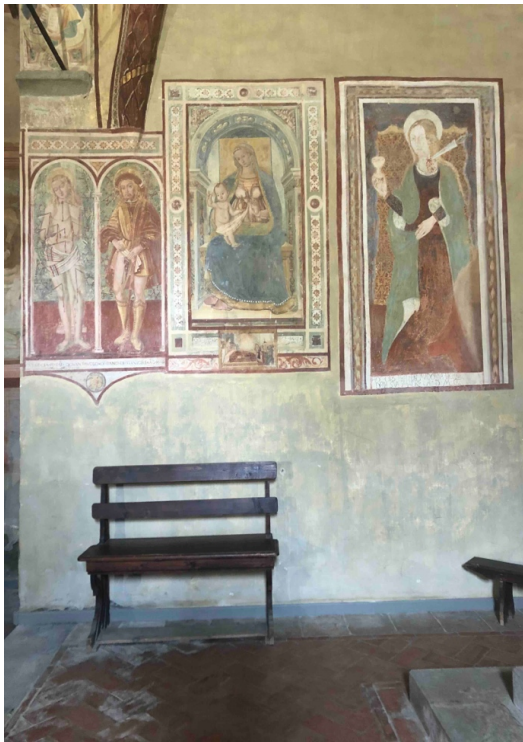


Fig. 1.8. Fresco ex-voto from the church of San Michele Archangelo on Isola Maggiore in Lake Trasimeno.



Fig. 1.9. Fresco ex-voto from the church of San Michele Archangelo on Isola Maggiore in Lake Trasimeno, detail.

Painted ex-votos also appeared as frescoes added to church walls. An example of an added fresco ex-voto can be found in the church of San Michele Archangelo on Isola Maggiore in Lake Trasimeno (figs. 1.8 and 1.9). In this example, a fresco on the left-hand side of the nave depicts a Virgin and Child in the locally popular style of Perugino. Directly below this image is a small somewhat-damaged fresco of a framed ex-voto scene. Despite lacunae, the scene is easy to decipher as an ex-voto. It follows what was to become a classic formula in the sixteenth century: on the left a person lays sick in bed, at the foot of the bed are at least seven kneeling figures, with hands clasped in prayer presumably requesting healing for the sick person and/or in thanks for healing received. What makes this scene unique is that it survives today as a clear formulaic fresco ex-voto rather than the typical donor portrait next to a saint as we saw with Mantegna's *Madonna della Vittoria*.



Fig. 1.10. Anonymous, *tavoletta* from the ex-voto museum at the church of the Madonna della Quercia, Viterbo, 1656.

Tavolette, or painted ex-voto panels also appeared in the aforementioned Basilica of the Santissima Annunziata in seventeenth-century Florence. At that time, *tavolette* generally consisted of wooden panel with painted pigments—either egg tempera or the increasingly popular oil paint.⁵⁵ *Tavolette* first appeared at the end of the fifteenth century and quickly became one of the most common types of ex-votos in the sixteenth century. *Tavolette* were distinct from high quality ex-voto paintings, which only the wealthy could afford. Instead, they could be and were purchased and dedicated by a much broader spectrum of devotees. Figure 1.10 is an example of a typical *tavoletta* from the early modern period. This particular image is oil on panel and is housed in the ex-voto museum in the church of the Madonna della Quercia in Viterbo, dating to 1656. It shows the cult image, the Virgin and Child in an oak tree, on the left-hand side of the painting. On the right-hand side, two figures kneel in front of a sick person lying in a canopied bed. The man has arms outstretched beseechingly toward the Madonna and Child while the woman clasps her hands in prayer. The scene is focused on depicting only the most important parts to convey the story. The bedroom vignette represents a continuous narrative in which the bedridden patient and their genuflecting companions are shown simultaneously requesting aid from and giving thanks for the grace received to the Madonna, thereby implying the illness was cured. The fact that the grace was received is explicitly confirmed with an inclusion of a small note painted below the kneeling man which reads “*Votum fecit [gr]atiam*

⁵⁵ Jacobs, Fredrika. 2016. “Humble Offerings” in *Ex Voto: Votive Giving Across Cultures*. Edited by Ittai Weinryb. New York, [New York: Bard Graduate Center, 151-152.

accept MDCLVI—vow made, grace accepted 1656. This simple yet clear narrative style is characteristic of *tavolette*, which are known for their direct portrayal of gratitude for answered prayer. It is also worth noting the current condition of this work, which is a worn piece of wood panel. Although these paintings were at times of finer quality, they most often are in a state of disrepair and decay due to the inferior quality of materials used and their perishable nature. Over the centuries, these objects, which could number in the hundreds in a single collection, often have not received the highest care and many times show extreme signs of wear. This particular panel is worm-eaten, and paint and wood have flaked off along the edges.⁵⁶ This ephemerality recalls the same qualities of wax—and Jacobs attests that this “disregard for durability” went with the preference of devotees to give an ex-voto of humble materials.⁵⁷ The use of humble materials may also have been a side-effect of the lower economic means of some devotees.

⁵⁶ According to Jacobs, this “humble” quality was a reason devotees chose to utilize this form of votive as it resonated with the humility of the worshipper who left it in the church or shrine.

⁵⁷ Jacobs, Fredrika H. 2013. *Votive Panels and Popular Piety in Early Modern Italy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 75, 93-94, 96.



Fig. 1.11. Bonaventura Berlinghieri, *Saint Francis*, tempera on wood, 1235. Church of San Francesco, Pescia. Artwork in the public domain. Photo credit: <https://www.wga.hu/html/b/berlingh/stfranci.html>

There are at least two traditions that set precedents for *tavolette* in the Roman Catholic context: altarpieces with vita scenes and their cousins, *predella* paintings.⁵⁸ One example of a vita icon is Bonaventura Berlinghieri's *Altarpiece of Saint Francis* dating to 1235, created just nine years after the death of Saint Francis of Assisi (fig. 1.11). The central figure of Saint Francis appears in Italo-Byzantine style and is flanked by six scenes from his life: three to the left and three to the right. These include popular stories from his life (receiving the stigmata, preaching to the birds, and so on) as well as miracles he performed. Since Francis was a new saint, it was

⁵⁸ Ibid, 19 and 42.

important to advertise his miraculous works. These vita scenes are similar in content to *tavolette*, which also advertised a saint's miraculous works.



Fig. 1.12. Piero della Francesca, *Polyptych of Saint Anthony*, tempera on panel, c.1460. Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria, Perugia.



Fig. 1.13: Piero della Francesca, *Polyptych of Saint Anthony*, detail: Saint Elizabeth saves a boy, tempera on panel, c.1460. Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria, Perugia.

Even more similar to the *tavoletta* is the *predella* painting. *Predella* paintings were the lower portion of an altarpiece generally consisting of three to five small rectangular-shaped paintings (much the size of the *tavoletta*) of narrative scenes of the life and miracles of saints depicted in the altarpiece above. Piero della Francesca's *Polyptych of Saint Anthony* (fig. 1.12) in the Galleria Nazionale di Perugia (painted between 1467-1469) demonstrates three examples of *predella* paintings, each one connected to a saint that is depicted in the *sacra conversazione* above: a miracle of Saint Anthony, the stigmata of Saint Francis of Assisi, and lastly a miracle of Saint Elizabeth (fig. 1.13). The miracle of Saint Elizabeth, in particular, is set up much in the style of *tavolette*, which would appear in the hundreds in this region in the following decades. The composition revolves around a well, in which a boy has fallen. A woman gazes down while a man comes with a rope to try to rescue him. Two figures on the left of the composition kneel in prayer to Saint Elizabeth, who appears in the clouds in the upper right-hand corner. This indicates a posthumous miracle in which the saint hears the prayers of the devout and appears to grant their request. Displaying this type of imagery at an altar dedicated to a saint, which could also potentially contain miracle-working relics, was essentially advertising the efficacy of the cult.⁵⁹ Like *predella* paintings, most *tavolette* were small and rectangular and depicted miracles associated with a saint's altar. Also, much like the content of *predella* paintings, *tavolette* depicted the moment of crisis when the

⁵⁹ Ibid, 19.

Madonna or saint in question intervened. Both would have been placed on the altar or as near as possible to the tomb, relic, or miraculous image of the saint.

Considering all the options available, what led to the popularity of *tavolette* as seen in the Santissima Annunziata? Perhaps the similarity to vita icons and altarpieces spoke of a sense of sanctity the devoted wanted to impart. Mary Laven also points out that because *tavolette* are painted on wood—a substance that calls to mind the material of the cross and its association with personal sacrifice—they could be carried like an allegorical personal cross in an embodied experience into the church to be given.⁶⁰ But what really sets *tavolette* apart from other types of ex-votos is their ability to narrate a particular story.⁶¹ Although they could also be serially produced like wax, they were often finished with identifying information about the devotee either in written text or painted details that gave a personal quality to the offering. The documentation of these types of votives in miracle books is marked by the usage of the verb “*narrare*” meaning to narrate.⁶² This narrative element can be seen as part of their visual qualities. *Tavolette*, as with other ex-votos, should be considered in their context of display. In the case of the Santissima Annunziata these were displayed on every possible inch of the church creating what historian Mary Laven

⁶⁰ Laven, Mary. 2019. “Wax Versus Wood: The Material of Votive Offerings in Renaissance Italy” in *Religious Materiality in the Early Modern World*. United States: Amsterdam University Press, 46.

⁶¹ Ibid, 45; and Jacobs, Fredrika H. 2013. *Votive Panels and Popular Piety in Early Modern Italy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 28.

⁶² Laven, Mary. 2019. “Wax Versus Wood: The Material of Votive Offerings in Renaissance Italy” in *Religious Materiality in the Early Modern World*. United States: Amsterdam University Press, 46.

calls “a visual mosaic of stories.”⁶³ Like the old adage “a picture is worth a thousand words,” these images recorded the details of miraculous stories attributed to a particular holy image in the very place that power was meant to reside, further amplifying feelings of potency in the sacred space.

Another reason for the rise in popularity of the *tavoletta* may have had to do with increasing restrictions on popular religious practices because of the Catholic Reformation. The most notable cultural shift of the time was instigated by the Protestant Reformation in 1517 and the subsequent Catholic/Counter Reformation initiated by the Council of Trent from 1545–1563. Due to these reformations, restrictions of religious imagery began to be implemented. The Council of Trent was not explicit in their modifications, stating only that images in churches were to be henceforth used for the worship of the divine, devoid of superfluous ornamentation, and not to be remotely confused with pagan worship.⁶⁴ Treatises were written by several authors shortly thereafter who were eager to clarify these restrictions, such as Gabriele Paleotti's *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images* from 1582.⁶⁵ Although these types of documents are good indications of popular sentiments that were floating through the Catholic world at the time, there is no clarity as to the extent in which they were utilized within artistic circles. Fredrika Jacobs asserts that the

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*; Original Text with English Translation, by Rev. H.J. Schroeder, O.P. 1960. Missouri: B. Herder Book co. [1960-1941].

⁶⁵ Paleotti, Gabriele, William McCuaig, and Paolo Prodi. 2012. *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images*. Translated by William McCuaig. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute. In addition there was a chapter on ex-votos which was not written— discussed by Holmes.

popularity of *tavolette* coincided with the Roman Catholic Church's desire to control images and their display.⁶⁶ The *tavoletta*, in contrast to ex-votos of bodily parts, deliberately shows the saint responsible for the miracle and is not easily confused with pagan devotion. Following this line of thought, I would argue that the Counter Reformation's effect on personal devotional practices can possibly be seen as a proponent for the proliferation of this type of votive giving.

The above sections on silver, wax, paper and painting outline reasons why particular ex-votos were chosen and how materiality contributed to meaning. Specific attention was given to painted ex-votos, which serve as a precursor to the ex-voto tradition in the church of the Madonna dei Bagni. The following section will discuss important functions of ex-votos, with a focus on painted images.

The evidentiary functions of ex-votos

Even though *tavolette* rose in popularity, they did not displace other forms of ex-votos which are continuously recorded in historical accounts of various shrines from the time. All the types of ex-votos reviewed above continue to appear in historical accounts of various shrines across Italy. Michel de Montaigne describes ex-votos at the sanctuary of the Madonna di Loreto in 1581.⁶⁷ He lists an abundance of choices: figurines made of papier-mâché, terra cotta, wood, wax, tin, or silver representing

⁶⁶ Jacobs, Fredrika. 2013. *Votive Panels and Popular Piety in Early Modern Italy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 17.

⁶⁷ Jacobs, Fredrika. 2016. "Five. Humble Offerings: Votive Panel Paintings in Renaissance Italy" in *Ex Voto*. United States: Bard Graduate Center, Exhibitions Department, 143.

anything from the Virgin Mary to a pair of eyes, candles of different lengths, quantities of wax of different colors, and *tavolette*.⁶⁸ The continuation of so many different forms of ex-votos after the emergence and popularity of the *tavolette* roughly a century before begs the question: what drove devotees' choices in selecting one type of ex-voto over another?

As previously noted, ex-votos of body parts appealed to devotees particularly because they functioned as surrogates for the devoted directly before the holy image. These types of ex-votos could function similarly to *tavolette* in that one of their purposes could be a vow fulfillment (*ex-voto sucsepto*) with specific reference to the donor. However, the *tavolette* narrate in imagery a miracle and are usually inscribed with the letters PGR (*per grazia ricevuta*). This label signifies that the object is being left in a place of worship in response to a miracle already received. This is a noteworthy difference between the painted panel (functioning as *ex-voto sucsepto*) and the commonly utilized votive representing a body part. The votives of body parts could be left at a shrine either to request healing or in response to a healing. With the painted panel ex-voto, there is no ambiguity; the painting asserts that the miracle has already occurred. In her essay *Renaissance Perspectives on Classical Antique Votive Practices*, the art historian Megan Holmes further develops this distinction, noting that *tavolette* show the specificity of time, place, and identity as opposed to votives of body parts (which evoke human presence).⁶⁹ This is not to say that specificity of time

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Holmes, Megan. 2016. "Renaissance Perspectives on Classical Antique Votive Practices" in *Ex Voto*. Bard Graduate Center, 122.

and place opposes presence, as *tavolette* also denote presence of the devotee, but they do so in even stronger, relatable and more personal terms than do generic body parts. They do this because they depict the devotee in person and in an interaction with the holy subject. This special connection is commemorated in the cult site which is its own time and space. There is an intersection of various times and spaces that is meaningful to the devotee beyond the miracle itself, through the presence of the devotee and the miracle in the holy site. These ideas with regard to the Madonna dei Bagni will be pursued in a later chapter.

Throughout the Middle Ages and early modern period, local saints became more appealing to communities because of their affinity with particular locations. As miracles arose around a potential saint, locals pressed the Church for canonization. One way to do this was by placing ex-votos at a site as proof of miraculous interventions. An early example is from the convent of Sant'Agostino in Norcia, where an effigy of Saint Nicolas of Tolentino was covered with votive offerings well before the Church officially authorized his veneration as a saint in 1325.⁷⁰ In the following century, *tavolette* were likewise used as evidence of the legitimacy of a cult. Bacci notes that *tavolette* became widespread in the same period that Catholic devotional life became increasingly committed to worshipping at new Marian shrines.⁷¹ As local saints and miraculous Madonnas arose in the sixteenth century, the *predella*-like *tavolette* functioned as visual proof of the divine at these locations.

⁷⁰ Bacci, Michele. 2016. "Italian Ex-Votos and 'Pro-Anima' Images in the Late Middle Ages" in *Ex Voto*. Bard Graduate Center, 84.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 77-78.

Tavolette, due to the direct representation of place within a miraculous narrative, linked the believer with a particular space, often claiming a local space as holy.



Fig. 1.14. Circle of Titian, *St. Roch*, woodcut, c. 1524. Image in the public domain. Photo credit: British Museum https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1860-0414-140

The evidentiary value of the *tavoletta* can be noted in the woodcut of *St Roch* after a design by Titian which was created to popularize the cult of Saint Roch in Venice in 1524 (fig. 1.14). The central figure of the saint is flanked by lateral vita scenes, four to the right and four to the left. At the bottom of the altarpiece of Saint Roch, three objects are propped up against the image of the saint: a box for alms, a votive head (presumably made of wax), and a *tavoletta*. The *tavoletta* depicts a person in bed with hands clasped in prayer, gazing up at the left-hand corner of the

frame where Saint Roch appears in response to the devotee in need. Illegible text is included at the bottom of the *tavoletta*, making it compositionally similar to the vita scenes of the altarpiece—a clear reference that the scene is a continuation of the narrative of the life and miracles of Saint Roch. The main image of Roch shows the saint in contrapposto pose, revealing the plague wound on his upper thigh as he is met by an angel in the upper left-hand corner of the scene; the pictured *tavoletta* echoes this same composition. The *tavoletta* is placed on a diagonal axis that starts with the angel, includes the gesture of the saint and is partly aligned with the direction of his staff, highlighting its importance in the scene. Here the *tavoletta* and the wax head serve as compositional devices which intend to prove the efficacy of the miraculous powers of the saint. These two objects along with the alms box were likely chosen to represent different meanings of votive giving. The wax head indicates the votary has placed themselves permanently “in the flesh” in front of the sacred image. The *tavoletta* also performs this function, but at the same time narrates a particular story of salvation to the viewer both by image and text.

The previous sections have considered the various materials commonly used for ex-votos and the evidentiary functions of various types. The next section builds upon this by focusing on the specific case study of ex-votos in the church of the Madonna dei Bagni.

Case Study: The Madonna dei Bagni



Fig. 1.15. Interior of the sanctuary of the Madonna dei Bagni, Deruta.

Around 1500, corresponding to the rise in popularity of *tavolette*, ex-votos began to appear on a new type of media in central Italy: maiolica. Maiolica ex-votos were similar in form to *tavolette*: they were painted scenes of miracles in two dimensions but differed in their durability and coloring. The earliest surviving maiolica ex-votos from the sixteenth century come from the maiolica-producing town of Deruta, in Umbria. Today the local *derutese* church of the Madonna dei Bagni contains over 800 maiolica ex-voto tiles (fig. 1.15). This little-studied church offers a unique opportunity to address nearly all the ex-votos made for the cult permanently displayed in the original space of their dedication. Most other painted panel traditions differ as

either the condition of ex-votos deteriorates and/or they are habitually removed from the original space.⁷²

There are two primary literary sources documenting the origin of the cult of the Madonna dei Bagni/ Madonna del Bagno.⁷³ The first is the report of the process of the canonization of the cult which began 25 September 1657. As part of the canonical process, the Benedictines of the Abbey of San Pietro in Perugia collected the testimonies and wrote down the offerings left in the sanctuary of the Madonna del Bagno starting in 1657; these testimonies are preserved in the historical archive of the abbey today.⁷⁴ The fact that they recorded the offerings left at the sanctuary shows the legitimizing value of these objects of popular devotion.

The other source documenting the origin of the cult is the *Historia* compiled by an anonymous author who was likely a participant and observer of the original

⁷² The Second Vatican Council which began in 1962 instigated a “cleaning up” of Roman Catholic shrines. This led to the sweeping away of most ex-votos, which surrounded miraculous images and relics, and resulted in extreme changes to the appearances of shrines. One notable example is the shrine of the Madonna del Parto in the church of Sant’Agostino in Rome. Photographs and prints show the sculpture of the Madonna and Child by Jacopo Sansovino covered in votive offerings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although there continues to be devotion to this sculpture today, votive offerings are much less numerous, kept in tidy order around the shrine, and are periodically swept away.

⁷³ The cult and church were originally named the Madonna del Bagno, but over time became known as the Madonna dei Bagni. In recent years there has been a push for the reuse of the original name by the church’s priest and subsequently more recent publications in the twenty-first century have used this version of the cult’s name. It is still known colloquially by locals as the Madonna dei Bagni. While referencing the early years of the original cult, I will use the name Madonna del Bagno, however I defer to the local’s current use of the name Madonna dei Bagni when discussing the church today.

⁷⁴ Nicolini, Ugolino. 1983. “La Madonna dei Bagni: il culto e la documentazione” in *Gli Ex-voto in maiolica della Chiesa della Madonna dei Bagni a Casalina presso Deruta*. 1. ed. Firenze: Nuova Guaraldi, 42.

events.⁷⁵ This author gives a background to the story of the Madonna del Bagno, making sure to detail the terrible state of affairs in the community at the onset of the cult due to a plague that had recently ravaged the local area along with the whole of the Italian peninsula.⁷⁶ The author goes on to describe the physical environment, with a particular focus on Deruta and maiolica production.⁷⁷ It is noteworthy that even at its inception, there was an interest in the cult's materiality.

According to this same author, the origin story of the Madonna del Bagno goes as follows: in 1643 a man named Fra Pietro Bruni was traveling along a forested road in an area known as the Colle del Bagno when he came upon a ceramic cup painted with the image of the Madonna and Child on the ground. Seeing the sacred image, he kissed it and placed it between the branches of an oak tree for others to revere, thinking to himself: "perhaps one day this image will work miracles." As time passed, the cup fell from the branches and broke several times, until eventually a man named Christofano di Filippo secured it to the tree with two nails.⁷⁸ Sometime later Christofano was traveling along this same road, distraught because his wife was at home dying. He looked up to see the ceramic image he had secured in the tree and

⁷⁵ *Historia della Madonna del Bagno de' Padri Casinensi di Perugia scopertasi l'anno MDCLVII. Composta da Persona assai beneficata, e tenuta a questa Regina Celeste*, Archivio di San Pietro (Perugia), mazzo XXVI/1 cc. 1r-36v. in Grazietta Guaitini and Giulio. Busti. *Gli Ex-voto in maiolica della Chiesa della Madonna dei Bagni a Casalina presso Deruta*. 1. ed. Firenze: Nuova Guaraldi, 36.

⁷⁶ Nicolini, Ugolino. 1983. "La Madonna dei Bagni: il culto e la documentazione" in *Gli Ex-voto in maiolica della Chiesa della Madonna dei Bagni a Casalina presso Deruta*. 1. ed. Firenze: Nuova Guaraldi, 42.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 43-44.

⁷⁸ According to legend, the tree's branches then embraced the image of the Madonna and Child. Depictions on subsequent ex-votos reflect this iconography, with branches wrapped around the cult image.

asked the Madonna for help. When he arrived home, he found his wife out of bed, completely healed without the help of any medicine. The author notes that on 16 July 1657 (the feast of the Madonna del Carmine) Christofano di Filippo and his wife hung the first ex-voto at the shrine of the Madonna del Bagno. This miracle was soon followed by many more in the community. Recognizing the Madonna's origination of miracles at this site, worshippers flocked to pray for the Madonna's intervention into their own lives. With each miracle, the devotees brought ex-votos to the site. Originally these ex-votos were nailed to the same oak tree which held the image of the Madonna and Child and consisted of images, crutches, belts and other objects. They were added in great numbers especially during fairs and religious holidays. For example, during a fair in Deruta it is documented that thirty silver votives were left that day along with many more composed of varied materials including wax, terracotta, wood, and alms, among other types of votives.⁷⁹

According to the author, on both sides of the Tiber there were populations who flocked to the Madonna del Bagno.⁸⁰ Because there was so much veneration, Church authorities sought to control the cult. This author documented the Church proceedings to legitimize the cult, thereby showing that they were important enough

⁷⁹ Guaitini, Grazia and Tullio Seppilli. 1983. "L'irruzione del negativo e l'intervento del soprannaturale nello spazio e nel tempo quotidiano: la fondazione del culto e il corpus di ex-voto in maiolica della Madonna dei Bagni" in *Gli Ex-voto in maiolica della Chiesa della Madonna dei Bagni a Casalina presso Deruta*. 1. ed. Firenze: Nuova Guaraldi, 25.

⁸⁰ They continue with annual pilgrimage processions today: Casalina (on Easter day), Ripabianca (Easter Monday), Papiano (Easter Tuesday morning) and Deruta (Tuesday afternoon). Nicolini, Ugolino. 1983. "La Madonna dei Bagni: il culto e la documentazione" in *Gli Ex-voto in maiolica della Chiesa della Madonna dei Bagni a Casalina presso Deruta*. 1. ed. Firenze: Nuova Guaraldi, 45.

to be privy to Church documentation—some of which has not survived today. The author also discusses another twenty-nine graces in addition to those already discussed in the proceedings—miracles accounted for according to the ex-votos hanging around the image of the Madonna and Child in the tree.⁸¹ This demonstrates the legitimizing function of the sheer number of ex-votos at the time. Following the Church proceedings, on 28 October 1657 the cult was officially recognized by the Catholic Church.

With thousands flocking to the site, a church building was constructed and consecrated within a few months.⁸² The church we see today is not the original size, which was much smaller. It was enlarged in 1687, presumably due to the popularity of the cult.⁸³ Because the name Madonna della Quercia (Madonna of the Oak Tree) was already used by a cult in nearby Viterbo, in order to avoid confusion, the name Madonna del Bagno (Madonna of the Spring) was chosen because of the spring that ran nearby.⁸⁴ At the time of the inception, materiality was clearly important to devotees of the cult, who gathered leaves and bark from the oak tree as well as water from the nearby spring (which also was purported to have curative effects due to its proximity to the cult image of the Madonna and Child in the tree).⁸⁵ These curative waters helped give rise to the use of the name Madonna del Bagno.

⁸¹ Ibid, 45-46.

⁸² For a detailed account of the church construction see Zucconi, Paolo. 1983. “Nota storica sull’edificio della chiesa della Madonna dei Bagni” in *Gli Ex-voto in maiolica della Chiesa della Madonna dei Bagni a Casalina presso Deruta*. 1. ed. Firenze: Nuova Guaraldi, 55-59.

⁸³ Ibid, 56.

⁸⁴ Guaitini, Grazia and Tullio Seppilli, 16.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 14.

Many ex-votos left at the Madonna del Bagno took the form of *tavolette*. Consistent with the rise in popularity of *tavolette* observed above, painted wooden panels were also embraced by the devotees to the Madonna del Bagno. In 1687, thirty years after the first ex-votos were placed on the oak tree, the community decided to do something completely novel: all deteriorating ex-votos of supplicants were remade as local maiolica tiles thanks to the alms of pious people.⁸⁶ Since that moment onwards, maiolica was the material that characterized this votive cult. The shift from wood to clay indicates that in this community *tavolette* were not primarily valued for their humble style, but for their ability to narrate stories and to localize those stories through picture, text, and material. These stories were not to be forgotten but memorialized in the same medium of the miraculous image of the Madonna and Child encased at the altar of the church.

This transformation of ex-votos from painting on wood to painting on ceramic not only commemorated their miracles in significantly more permanent material, but also bound the community's miraculous memories to their local maiolica trade. This highlighted the commercial success of the ceramic industry in Deruta, the same town that birthed the original miraculous maiolica image of the Madonna and Child.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 25. There are a few other examples in which ex-votos have been repaired or remade, these include the wax effigies at the Santissima Annunziata which were on display during the Renaissance—here the copies also eventually deteriorated and were completely lost. Another example are the ex-votos at the Madonna del Monte di Cesena in which case some dating to circa 1800 are inscribed with much earlier dates which indicate these were replacements. In both of these cases, the ex-votos which were remade were of the original medium which eventually saw the same type of deterioration as the prototype. The Madonna dei Bagni seems to be a unique case in which the materiality shifts in order to ensure the longevity of the votive. See Novelli, Leandro and Mario Massaccesi. 1961. *Ex voto del Santuario della Madonna del Monte di Cesena*. Forlì: [Società tip. forlivese], 39.

Although ex-votos can manifest in any form, nearly all subsequent ex-votos in the Madonna dei Bagni were/are created in this manner and placed onto the church walls.⁸⁷ They are arranged in a grid-like pattern, recalling their role as the figurative building blocks of the church's structure.

A comparison can be made between the tradition of the Madonna dei Bagni and that of the collection of early modern *tavolette* at the Madonna della Quercia near Viterbo, discussed above. In the case of the Madonna della Quercia, all extant early modern ex-votos have been moved to an adjacent ex-voto museum away from the cult image. If *tavolette* are still left today, they are not displayed in the church sanctuary nor the ex-voto museum. This movement affects the meaning of the ex-votos as they no longer appear in the shrine, but in a museum (and in the case of the Madonna della Quercia it is a museum that is almost always locked). In this way, they no longer function primarily as elements of an ongoing spiritual practice, but rather a relic of past devotion. The past's remoteness is amplified in the deterioration of their material. Most ex-votos at the Madonna della Quercia are made from wood and have been chipped, are faded and worm-eaten, if not missing chunks of the original panels altogether (see fig. 1.10). On the contrary, the ex-votos in the Madonna dei Bagni offer images as vibrant today as the day they were removed from their kilns over 300 years ago and are still intact in their original space. Although the ex-votos of the

⁸⁷ The four other types of ex-votos in the Madonna dei Bagni described in the 2010 catalog include two paintings thought to date from the end of the 1700s; a large ceramic vessel from 1931; and a Volterra alabaster Madonna and Child sculpture from 1988. Antonio Santantoni Menichelli, ed. 2010. "Altre opera votive" in *Ex-voto: Arte e fede nel santuario della Madonna del Bagno*. Perugia: Effe, 411-415.

Madonna dei Bagni and the Madonna della Quercia demonstrate similar narrative stories of prayers answered and miracles received, they differ in materiality and display. Those of the Madonna della Quercia are more aligned with practices at other Italian shrines, as discussed above. In contrast, the Madonna dei Bagni presents us with a unique approach to ex-votos. What are the repercussions of such differentiations in the case of the Madonna dei Bagni? The following chapters will explore the uniqueness of Deruta's renowned shrine in more detail.

Chapter 2

Maiolica Ex-Votos: Meaning-Making through Material and Image

Introduction

The Madonna dei Bagni's votive tradition began like most cults in Italy: devotees left a variety of ex-votos at the site of the miraculous image in thanks for prayers answered and miracles received. However, just thirty years after the church was constructed, followers decided to do something completely novel: they copied deteriorating *tavolette* (ex-voto panel paintings) onto durable maiolica tiles and from thence forward nearly all ex-votos left at the site were of this same medium. It is not difficult to appreciate the importance of maiolica for the cult of the Madonna dei Bagni. Besides the uniquely cohesive choice in maiolica for the hundreds of ex-votos lining the church walls, this medium also plays a crucial role in the inception of the cult; the cult image of the Madonna and Child itself is made of the same material, placed between the branches of a tree encased at the main altar. In addition, maiolica was important not just for this particular religious tradition but was the main economic source for the local community both at the inception of the cult in 1657 and today.

In the introduction to *Ways of Making and Knowing*, the editors point out that the material itself is important not only for the meaning of an object, but also for the

art of the maker.⁸⁸ They explain: “only with an awareness of material culture of the time can the historian elicit meanings that are not anachronistic or overly abstract.”⁸⁹ This chapter explores not only the technical knowledge of maiolica production but its importance and relevance in the discussion of the religious and socio-cultural function of the ex-votos at the Madonna dei Bagni. It also explores knowledge connected to the land, community and personal/collective devotion which is passed down through the making of these objects. I look not only at the materials that make up these ex-votos, but also the images that are painted on them and how materiality affects their appearance and interpretation. In the first half of this chapter, I argue that it is through an investigation of the process, form, and function of maiolica ex-votos that the value of this material in the church of the Madonna dei Bagni can be understood. In the second half of the chapter, I focus on iconographical elements of these ex-votos, arguing that specific elements and styles are utilized to form a cohesive body of images which support the miraculous nature of the cult image.

History of Deruta

In order to unpack fully the importance of maiolica ex-voto production, it is necessary to review briefly the economic and political history of Deruta.⁹⁰ Although it was

⁸⁸ Smith, Pamela H., Amy R. W. Meyers, and Harold John Cook, eds. 2014. *Ways of Making and Knowing: the Material Culture of Empirical Knowledge*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 8.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 9.

⁹⁰ For an in depth historical analysis of Deruta, see: Francesco Federico Mancini. 1980. *Deruta e il suo territorio: guida storico-artistica*. Perugia: Pro Deruta; and Stefania Zucchini, and Augusto Ciuffetti. 2011. *Deruta e il suo territorio: La storia-I documenti*. Deruta: Deputazione di storia patria per l’Umbria.

inhabited in ancient times and may very well have been the site of ceramic production in earlier eras, the town only began to truly flourish with the expansion of its ceramic production in the Middle Ages.⁹¹ Tin-glazing, which is the basis for maiolica, began to be used in the Islamic world in the eighth century, came to Muslim Spain in the twelfth century and arrived in Italy around 1200.⁹² Maiolica production likely developed in Deruta around the mid-thirteenth century due to the availability of clay in the nearby hills and on the shores of the Tiber River, as well as the abundance of other necessary resources in the area such as firewood to fuel kilns.⁹³ Both nearby Perugia and Assisi financially backed Deruta's maiolica production. Deruta was close enough to these economic centers to supply ceramics to them, but far enough to not be a major fire hazard to these larger communities. By the mid-fourteenth century, Deruta had become a major producer of maiolica in the region of Umbria.⁹⁴ Production flourished throughout the Renaissance, leading Dominican historian Leandro Alberti to note in 1551: "the terracotta vases made in Deruta are often mentioned for how well they are made, and beautifully decorated. And it is believed that there are no other craftsmen in Italy that can match the work even though there have been attempts to do so..."⁹⁵

⁹¹ Busti, Giulio and Franco Cocchi. 1997. *Maestri Ceramisti e Ceramiche di Deruta*. Arnaud: Deruta, 46.

⁹² Sani, Elisa Paola., J. V. G. Mallet, and Reino Liefkes. 2012. *Italian Renaissance Maiolica*. Hardback ed. London: V & A Pub, 17-18.

⁹³ The first known document relating to pottery production in Deruta is from 1287. Giulio Busti and Franco Cocchi. 1997. *Maestri Ceramisti e Ceramiche di Deruta*. Arnaud: Deruta, 46.

⁹⁴ Fiocco, C. and G. Gherardi. 1994. *La Ceramica di Deruta dal XIII al XVII secolo*. Volumnia Editrice: Perugia, 98.

⁹⁵ Alberti, Leandro. 1551. *Descrittione di tutta Italia*, 79.

By the mid-sixteenth century, ceramic production was at its height, bringing a period of economic stability which lasted throughout the seventeenth century.⁹⁶ In the eighteenth century, Umbria, part of the Papal States, was hit with an economic crisis.⁹⁷ This politically-induced crisis, coupled with a lack of interest in traditional maiolica techniques due to the advent of the Industrial Revolution, steadily decreased maiolica production in Deruta into the nineteenth century.⁹⁸ According to one source, the town was reduced to just five workshops by 1854.⁹⁹ It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that interest in maiolica heritage was renewed, led by a handful of talented artists committed to recreating the local Renaissance tradition.¹⁰⁰ This instigated a rebirth of maiolica production at the beginning of the twentieth century. At this time, large workshops were revived, and the economy flourished due to the increasing market for maiolica products. As of 2023, Deruta contained between 100-150 official workshops and continued to produce ceramics for buyers both locally and abroad.¹⁰¹ This history is important to note as the ebbs and flows of maiolica

⁹⁶ Busti, Giulio and Franco Cocchi. 1997. *Maestri Ceramisti e Ceramiche di Deruta*. Arnaud: Deruta, 48-50.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 51.

⁹⁸ Fiocco, C. and G. Gherardi. 1994. *La Ceramica di Deruta dal XIII al XVII secolo*. Volumnia Editrice: Perugia, 131.

⁹⁹ “oggi la lavorazione delle maioliche vi è assai minuita e scaduta, contandosi solo cinque officine di vasellame smaltato bianco...” local historian Giuseppe Bianconi, writing in 1854, as quoted in Giulio Busti and Franco Cocchi. 1997. *Maestri Ceramisti e Ceramiche di Deruta*. Arnaud: Deruta, 38.

¹⁰⁰ These artists included Angelo Micheletti (1855-1901), Alpinolo Magnini (1877-1953), Ubaldo Grazia (1887-1961), and David Zapirovic (1855-1946).

¹⁰¹ Information based on interviews conducted in 2023. In addition to official workshops, countless smaller workshops continue to flourish privately out of homes in Deruta.

production are reflected in the ex-voto tiles which were produced for the Madonna dei Bagni since the mid-seventeenth century.

Maiolica Ex-votos

Decorative use of maiolica in local churches became popular in the sixteenth century when maiolica production was at its height. For example, Deruta's main church of San Francesco in the city center contained an elaborate maiolica tile floor which was commissioned in 1524.¹⁰² Likewise, in the sixteenth century, artists from Deruta created an intricate pavement for the Baglioni Chapel in the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in the nearby town of Spello.¹⁰³ Maiolica use for ex-votos emerged around the same time. The earliest known maiolica ex-voto dates to 1505 and was made in Deruta.¹⁰⁴ Unlike most *tavolette* and later maiolica ex-votos, it is a circular shape. This tondo is finely painted, depicting two sick figures in bed with four kneeling personages surrounding them and the Virgin Mary appearing in the clouds above to

¹⁰² This pavement is comprised of approximately 200 surviving tiles in the form of crosses, eight-pointed stars, rectangular and square shapes. It was originally located in the chapel of the Compagnia del Rosario e Morte for the church of Sant'Angelo in Deruta. It was later moved to the church of San Francesco. Due to disrepair, this masterpiece was covered in 1652. It was only in 1902 that the maiolica tiles were rediscovered. Today they have been moved to Deruta's adjacent maiolica museum. See Fiocco, C. and G. Gherardi. 1994. *La Ceramica di Deruta dal XIII al XVII secolo*. Volumnia Editrice: Perugia, 113.

¹⁰³ Fiocco, C. and G. Gherardi. 1994. *La Ceramica di Deruta dal XIII al XVII secolo*. Volumnia Editrice: Perugia, 119.

¹⁰⁴ This votive plaque is important not only for being the earliest maiolica ex-voto, but also for being the earliest dated piece from Deruta. While the ex-voto is dated on the front, the location of its manufacture is inscribed on the back, along with the initial G, presumably in reference to the maker. Formerly a part of the William A. Clark Collection in the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., the current location of this piece is unknown since the dismantling of the collection in 2014. For more detailed information of this work see Wendy M. Watson. 1986. *Italian Renaissance Maiolica from the William A. Clark Collection*. London: Scala Books.

grant healing.¹⁰⁵ An inscription surrounding the image gives thanks to the Virgin for her grace given. Two holes at the top of the ex-voto indicate it was made to be hung with wire in the church in which it was dedicated.

From the early sixteenth through the early seventeenth century, maiolica ex-votos consistently appeared alongside *tavolette*. Other extant (or known) sixteenth century maiolica ex-votos were also made in Deruta and were again of fine quality, but mostly appeared in square, diamond, or rectangular shapes. Although not all of these ex-votos can be linked to particular shrines, there are two which were made for the Madonna dell'Olivo in the town of Passignano sul Trasimeno on the banks of Lake Trasimeno in Umbria, not far from Deruta.¹⁰⁶ This cult also revolves around an image of the Virgin and Child in a tree, and perhaps influenced the *derutesi* to memorialize their own Virgin/tree cult years later.¹⁰⁷

One early maiolica ex-voto, in the collection of the Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria in Perugia, is dated to 1548. Although it is not known to which cult this particular Madonna and Child relates, the devotee had this ex-voto created with great care. The composition consists of a man and woman kneeling before a Madonna and Child who appear in the clouds.¹⁰⁸ The whole scene is depicted in realistic detail, from the rosy cheeks of the Madonna to the tiny twigs on the tree behind the kneeling

¹⁰⁵ For a reproduction of this work see *Ibid*, 77.

¹⁰⁶ Busti, Giulio, ed. 1987. *Deruta l'art de la ceramique*. Il Torchio: Firenze, 56-57; 70.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*. The above publication does not explicitly discuss the imagery of the tree in this particular cult, but the fact that the cult image revolves around a Madonna and Child in a tree can be deduced from the naming of the cult (Madonna of the Olive Tree) and the imagery provided in the ex-votos.

¹⁰⁸ For an image of this ex-voto see Gwaitini, Grazietta and Giulio Busti. 1983. *Gli Ex-voto in maiolica della Chiesa della Madonna dei Bagni a Casalina presso Deruta*. 1. ed. Firenze: Nuova Guaraldi

worshippers. The color red is used both for the tunic of the kneeling man and the dress of the Madonna as well as other details. This color was used sparingly in maiolica at the time and took great skill to produce, thus indicating that this worshipper desired to create a lasting testament of fine quality.¹⁰⁹ Compositionally, the red color draws attention to the figures of the man and Mary, creating a vivid visual link between the devotee and his protector.

A few known narrative maiolica ex-votos predate the cult of the Madonna dei Bagni. Following the popularity of the cult in the second half of the seventeenth century, other maiolica ex-votos began to appear in various locations. Another church in Deruta, the Madonna delle Piagge, contains copies of ten maiolica ex-voto tiles, while the originals, dating to the second half of the seventeenth through the eighteenth centuries, are now located in Deruta's ceramic museum.¹¹⁰ Other maiolica-producing locations in Italy show evidence of ex-voto production as well, albeit at a much smaller scale. There is one maiolica ex-voto documented in Faenza depicting San Francesco di Paola made in the mid-nineteenth century.¹¹¹ Four others appear in Castelli's museum in Abruzzo dating to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹¹² By

¹⁰⁹ Red was made by grinding Armenian bole with red vinegar, and this mixture was then painted over light yellow. After firing, the resulting color red would appear thicker on top of the glaze than all other colors. See Sani, Elisa Paola., J. V. G. Mallet, and Reino Liefkes. 2012. *Italian Renaissance Maiolica*. Hardback ed. London: V & A Pub., 30.

¹¹⁰ This information is based on fieldwork collected in September 2018 and 2019.

¹¹¹ Cecchetti, Maria. 2000. *Targhe devozionali dell'Emilia Romagna*. Edit Faenza: Faenza, 348.

¹¹² Information provided here on the narrative ex-voto plaques in maiolica-producing town of Castelli is based off of field research done in September 2019. Castelli also has a collection of anatomical maiolica ex-votos. For a focused discussion on a selection of these anatomical maiolica ex-votos see Bencivenga, Alessandro, and Gianluca Di Luigi. 2015. "The Cult of St. Roch in Castelli (Abruzzo) and the Earthenware Anatomical Ex Voto." *Medicina nei secoli* 27 (1): 241–56.

and large, the greatest collection of maiolica ex-votos is in the church of the Madonna dei Bagni near Deruta, which contains over 800 ex-votos from the seventeenth century to the present day.

Overall, what binds these maiolica ex-votos together across time is that their appearance is just as brilliant today as the day they were removed from their kilns. Although images appear painted on the surface like *tavolette*, their materiality sets them apart for its enduring qualities. Apparently, its status as a humble medium was also significant. According to Petrarch, clay was the ideal medium for sculpture *because of its humility: not only is earth a humble material by nature (considering its low cost and its ubiquity below human feet) but in addition its Latin name, humus, is the root word for the Italian term umile, meaning humble.*¹¹³ Therefore, artists working with clay were certainly in line with working with a humble material, like that of wax or wood. Clay also recalls the biblical origin of mankind: God created Adam from clay—the name Adam meaning “from the earth.” I would also point out that clay is a term commonly mentioned biblically to associate mankind’s relationship to God. For example, Isaiah 64:8 states “But now, O Lord, You are our Father, We are the clay, and You our potter; And all of us are the work of Your hand.” Devotees might also have recalled the verse 2 Corinthians 4:7 “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves” when dedicating their maiolica ex-votos.

¹¹³ Cambareri, Marietta, Abigail Hykin, and Courtney Leigh Harris. 2016. *Della Robbia: Sculpting with Color in Renaissance Florence*. First edition. Boston: MFA Publications, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, 43.

Maiolica was used in the early modern period for fine church decoration as seen with the pavements in San Francesco in Deruta and Santa Maria Maggiore in Spello. The selection of maiolica for ex-votos indicates that devotees were choosing a material which was both humble, but also simultaneously visually striking as well as enduring and virtually eternal. In the following section I address the production process in order to understand more fully how the materiality of maiolica contributed to the devotional meanings of the ex-votos.

The Process of Maiolica Production

Clay is just one part of the material richness of maiolica—collecting clay is the first step in the complex process of making these ex-voto tiles. What we know today about early modern maiolica-making (a process which has changed in only minor ways over the centuries) stems from Cipriano Piccolopasso's *Li Tre Libri dell'Arte del Vasaio* (*The Three Books of the Potter's Art*) written in 1557.¹¹⁴ This manuscript was commissioned by the French Cardinal François de Tournon, who likely was interested in using this knowledge to manufacture maiolica in his hometown of Lyons.¹¹⁵ *The Three Books of the Potter's Art* is a detailed account of each step of the maiolica process and instructions on making and using various tools and techniques, complete

¹¹⁴ Piccolopasso, Cipriano, R. W. Lightbown, and Alan. Caiger-Smith. 1980. *The Three Books of the Potter's Art = I Tre Libri Dell'arte Del Vasaio : a Facsimile of the Manuscript in the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London. Edited by R. W. Lightbown and Alan. Caiger-Smith. London: Scolar Press. See also <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/piccolpassos-treatise-on-maiolica>

¹¹⁵ Sani, Elisa Paola., J. V. G. Mallet, and Reino Liefkes. 2012. *Italian Renaissance Maiolica*. Hardback ed. London: V & A Pub., 19.

with illustrations.¹¹⁶ The basic steps are as follows: the choice of clay, forming the work, a preliminary bisque firing, preparation and application of glaze and pigments, and lastly the second firing.¹¹⁷ During two separate research trips to Deruta, I worked with master ceramicists Nicola Boccini and Vinicio Barcaccia at the Scuola d'arte ceramica Romano Ranieri to recreate seventeenth-century tiles and to study specialized methods in maiolica making. During these trips, I personally remade two of the original ex-voto tiles; the first tile depicting the miracle associated with Christofano di Filippo from 1657 and another tile showing a man who was saved from a lightning strike. I learned methods for molding the tiles as well as various techniques for painting and glazing. The following description integrates Piccolopasso's description with knowledge gathered from personally working in a contemporary maiolica workshop in Deruta that follows traditional methods of production.

¹¹⁶ Although Piccolopasso details many regional ways of making maiolica, he seems to have specifically left out any mention of Deruta. The omission is a glaring one considering other contemporary authors such as Leandro Alberti's *Descrittione di tutta Italia*, (Description of all Italy, 1550) go into detail about the high quality of maiolica produced in Deruta at the time. His omission is particularly evident considering Piccolopasso also authored *Le piante e i ritratti delle Città e terre dell'Umbria* (The Plans and Portraits of the Cities and Lands of Umbria). This study of the region of Umbria the author even provides a cityscape drawing of Deruta, yet fails to mention the maiolica industry. For further discussion about this puzzling omission see Camille Leprince, Justin Raccanello, Elisa Paola Sani, eds. 2017. *Sacred and Profane Beauty: Deruta Renaissance Maiolica*. Feu et talent: Paris, 9.

¹¹⁷ Piccolopasso, Cipriano, R. W. Lightbown, and Alan. Caiger-Smith. 1980. *The Three Books of the Potter's Art = I Tre Libri Dell'arte Del Vasaio: a Facsimile of the Manuscript in the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London. Edited by R. W. Lightbown and Alan. Caiger-Smith. London: Scolar Press.

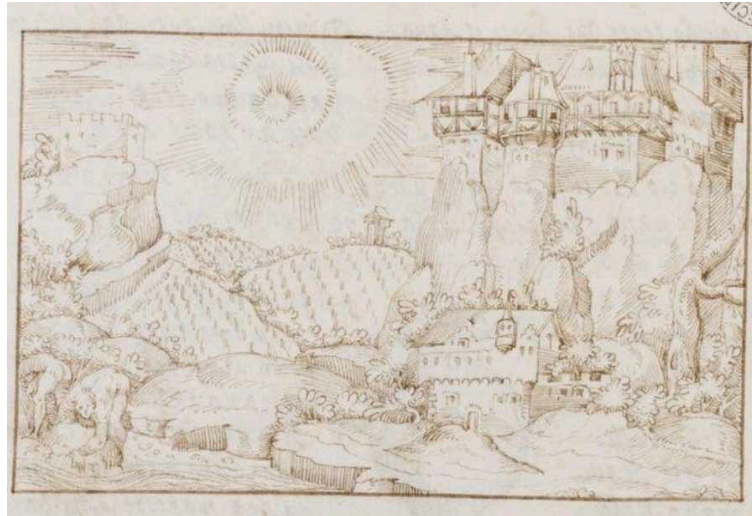


Fig. 2.1. Cipriano Piccolopasso, gathering clay from a riverbed, 1557. Image in the public domain.
Photo credit: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/piccolpassos-treatise-on-maiolica#?c=&m=&s=&cv=10&xywh=-132%2C0%2C2763%2C1903>

Clay was most commonly collected in a riverbed during the summer but could also be sourced in nearby hills.¹¹⁸ Piccolopasso illustrated his manuscript with detailed images, one of which shows figures hunched over in a riverbed collecting clay deposits (fig. 2.1). Until recently in Deruta, clay was collected from the banks of the Tiber River which flows nearby.¹¹⁹ Today, in order to protect local resources, clay used in Deruta ceramics is sourced from larger deposits found near Sansepolcro, about 50 miles away in Tuscany.¹²⁰ According to Piccolopasso, after the clay was collected, it was to be purified by drying, after which it was sifted to remove any remaining impurities. Once it was as fine as possible, water was added to the dry clay and it was kneaded by hand to remove any air bubbles.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 7.

¹¹⁹ Information based on interviews conducted in Deruta in 2018.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

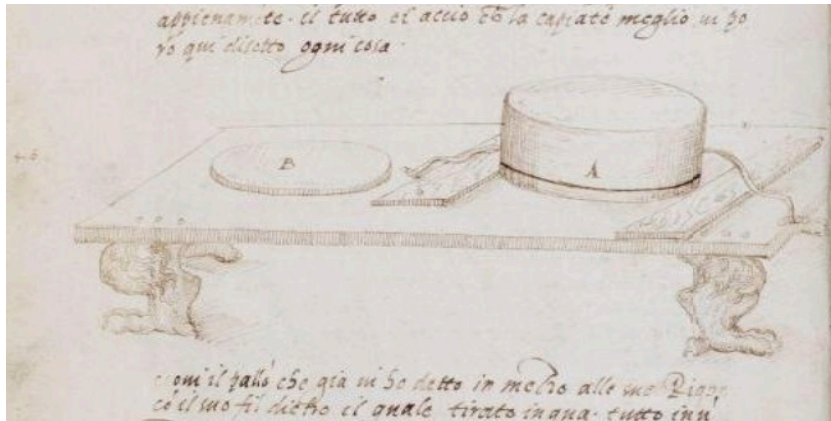


Fig. 2.2. Cipriano Piccolopasso, A slab of clay being cut, 1557. Image in the public domain. Photo credit: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/piccolpassos-treatise-on-maiolica#?c=&m=&s=&cv=25&xywh=-132%2C0%2C2762%2C1902>

Once the clay was kneaded, it was ready to be made into various objects.

Piccolopasso describes how to make and use the wheel for creating vessels but, in the case of the ex-voto tiles created for the Madonna dei Bagni, a slice would have been cut off the prepared clay to be molded into a particular shape (fig. 2.2).¹²¹ The ex-voto tiles could be molded by hand or made using plaster molds.¹²² The larger tiles in the church (which tend to be from the earliest period of production) are around 52 x 35 cm.¹²³ These proved to be less structurally sound than smaller sizes (around 32 x 24 cm, but as small as 20 x 20 cm), which had less risk of breaking in the kiln, and so became the norm over time.¹²⁴ Some early tiles included very intricate and unique molded frames in rectangular, hexagonal and octagonal shapes. Some rectangular

¹²¹ Piccolpasso, 24.

¹²² Information based on interviews conducted in Deruta in 2018.

¹²³ For detailed information on each tile see the following catalogs: Grazietta Guaitini and Giulio Busti. 1983. *Gli Ex-voto in maiolica della Chiesa della Madonna dei Bagni a Casalina presso Deruta*. Firenze: Nuova Guaraldi and Antonio Santantoni Menichelli, ed. 2010. *Ex-voto: Arte e fede nel santuario della Madonna del Bagno*. Perugia: Effe.

¹²⁴ Information based on interviews conducted in Deruta in 2018.

frames were formed with small clay balls along the perimeter, something that could never have been achieved on a flat *tavoletta*. Three-dimensional aspects highlighted the dynamism of the clay material itself, as well as the artistry and creativity of the maker. As tiles became more uniform, plaster molds were used increasingly to create even more structurally sound tiles. Today, this remains a common way to create maiolica ex-votos. Clay is pressed by hand into molds and left to dry (fig. 2.3). After a few days, the dried clay retreats from the edges of the plaster mold, making it easy to remove. Whether mold-made or not, the tiles need to dry for a few days before they are ready for their first firing.



Fig. 2.3. Clay hand-pressed into plaster mold. Photo from course at Scuola d'arte Ceramica Romano Ranieri, Deruta, 2018.

Piccolopasso provides great detail about how the brick kilns were created, what types of wood were used, at which times and for how long.¹²⁵ After the kiln was filled to the brim, it was bricked up. Due to the uncertainties of the firing process, prayers were said as the fire was lit. He elaborates: “All this being accomplished, invoking the name of *God* take a handful of straw, [and] with the sign of the cross light the fire...”¹²⁶ Once the fire was lit, it was built up for four hours using dry wood.¹²⁷ The fire was kept going for twelve hours, after which it was left to die out.¹²⁸ Leftover embers were made into charcoal, which was later used by painters in the winter to keep their hands warm as they worked.¹²⁹ In the twentieth century, the introduction of electric kilns changed this process considerably, although they too are costly to run. Once the kiln is cooled, the ceramics can be removed. The first transformation from cool grey clay to bright bisque terracotta ceramic is complete (fig. 2.4).

¹²⁵ Piccolopasso, 34-55.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 40.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 41.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.



Fig. 2.4. Tiles after a bisque firing. Photo from course at Scuola d'arte Ceramica Romano Ranieri, Deruta, 2018.

The next steps consist of preparing the glaze and applying it to the surface of the fired clay. The tiles are first dipped in a white tin-glaze, which makes maiolica ceramics distinctive. According to Piccolopasso, this glaze was most commonly made of sand, lees, tin and lead. Sand and lees were combined to make the *marzacotto*.¹³⁰ Tin and lead were combined in the furnace.¹³¹ Each of these ingredients was carefully sourced. The lees, for example, came from tartar collected from wine barrels or the dregs filtered from wine in November and December.¹³² This one ingredient shows that artisans had to be connected to the land and community in various ways—in this case, to wine production, which continues to be common in the area around Deruta.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 45.

¹³¹ Ibid, 36.

¹³² Ibid, 29.

Sand, on the other hand, came from further away—the best, according to Piccolopasso, came from San Giovanni in Tuscany.¹³³ Although less desirable, a more convenient source of sand for Deruta could be found on shores of the nearby Lake Trasimeno. After each of these ingredients was carefully sourced from both near and far, they were meticulously combined with water until they formed a smooth white liquid which should appear “like milk.”¹³⁴ Traditionally, the bisque-fired ceramic was then dipped into this mixture, or alternatively the mixture was poured over the ceramic with a bowl (fig. 2.5). Today, it may also be sprayed on. Once it is dry, other pigments are applied by painting them on top of the white glaze with brushes. Paintbrushes in Deruta were made of pig or goat hair (although Piccolopasso lists goat or ass), bound on a stick, and cut into a particular shape.¹³⁵ Today these brushes are more commonly store-bought.

¹³³ Ibid, 45.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 58.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 61 and information based on interviews conducted in Deruta in 2018.



Fig. 2.5. Application of the white tin-glaze. Photo from course at Scuola d'arte Ceramica Romano Ranieri, Deruta, 2018.

Piccolopasso offers various recipes for making several types of colors that are used in maiolica painting.¹³⁶ Green, or *verde-ramina*, was made with *ramina* (copper), lead and antimony; yellow with *ferraccia* (iron), lead and antimony; and light yellow with lees, salt, lead and antimony.¹³⁷ *Ferraccia* for yellow was sourced by scraping anchors from nearby Lake Trasimeno.¹³⁸ Today Deruta ceramicists use a specific color of blue (*blu Deruta*), which is three-parts blue cobalt to one-part green copper.¹³⁹ The most common colors were and continue to be yellow, orange, green,

¹³⁶ Piccolopasso, 32-34, 37-38, 44-51.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 32-33.

¹³⁸ Information based on interviews conducted in Deruta in 2018.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

blue, brown and manganese (a deep purplish-brown, appearing almost black, often used for outlines and letters on tiles), all of which contain lead. Each of these pigments is placed in a separate bowl to avoid contamination with the others and mixed with water to create the paint substance, much like watercolor paints. These pigments are then carefully applied with the brushes to the porous white underglaze. Pigments immediately fuse with the white glaze beneath, making any mistakes permanent unless the white is scraped off and reapplied. Prior knowledge of how the pigments appear once fired is key to creating a coherent image with maiolica. The pigment colors that are applied to the tin-white glaze do not correspond to final post-fired colors. Their hue depends on both the thickness of the application and the technique of the brushstroke. For example, if the green (*verde-ramina*), which appears black when it is painted, is applied too heavily, it will come out of the kiln shining silver instead of vibrant green.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ The above information is based on a course taken at Scuola d'art Ceramica Romano Ranieri in Deruta, 2018.

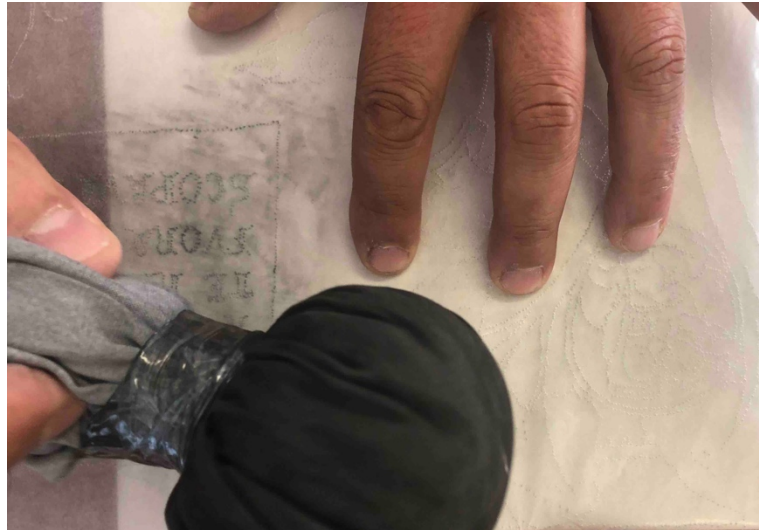


Fig. 2.6. Pouncing to transfer the image. Photo from course at Scuola d'arte Ceramica Romano Ranieri, Deruta, 2018.

To ensure accuracy of complex details, artists often use a preparatory sketch known as a cartoon. Although not described by Piccolopasso, this technique was often used in Renaissance painting when swift accuracy of the painter's hand was required. It is still used by workshops today in Deruta to create uniform designs and patterns. The cartoon is punched with tiny holes; then, using charcoal dust in a cloth pouch in a technique known as pouncing, the image is transferred through the holes to the tin-glazed tile (fig. 2.6). These lines are then carefully traced in pigments. Today, the painting of ex-votos is generally done on an easel, like a traditional panel or canvas painting.



Fig. 2.7. Cipriano Piccolopasso, building the fire, 1557. Image in the public domain. Photo credit: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/piccolpassos-treatise-on-maiolica#?c=&m=&s=&cv=42&xywh=-114%2C-1%2C2727%2C1879>

According to Piccolopasso, prayers again were made (“...in the name of Jesus Christ the setting of the kiln is begun...”) as the kiln was loaded for the second firing (fig. 2.7).¹⁴¹ The workshop would consider both the weather and the phase of the moon before lighting the fire, which usually happened once a month per workshop.¹⁴² It is worth noting that the kiln would be, and still is today, stacked to its full potential

¹⁴¹ Piccolopasso, 69.

¹⁴² Ibid. According to Piccolopasso, if a firing took place during a waning moon, it was believed that the fire would lack brightness, as the moon does at that time. This same logic applied to weather, for example if it were raining, a firing should be avoided.

since the firing process consumes considerable time, energy and money. Piccolopasso elaborates: “When all this has been done, prayers are offered to God with all the heart, thanking Him always for all the He gives.”¹⁴³ Firing is a precarious process, and any manner of disasters might happen inside a kiln firing such as variations in air flow or undetected air bubbles in the clay resulting in explosions which could destroy countless hours of labor. It would have been a relief to artists when pieces came out of the firing process unscathed. This final baptism by fire transforms the painted images from fragile pale colors to enduring and vibrant jewel-toned hues (figs. 2.8 and 2.9).¹⁴⁴ Taking into account the elaborate process of making maiolica, the materiality of the ex-votos in the Madonna dei Bagni is much more than fired clay or painted stories; the process of maiolica production itself could be understood as somewhat miraculous, not unlike the images these votives depict.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ This second firing is the final process unless gold lustre is added to the piece which requires additional firing after its application (most tiles in the Madonna dei Bagni do not contain gold lustre and it has only appeared in a few contemporary pieces). The fact that gold has been rarely used may relate back to the preference of utilizing humble materials for votive offerings. Economic factors must also be taken into account: gold and a third firing would make the offering more expensive.



Fig. 2.8. Painted tile before firing. Photo from course at Scuola d'arte Ceramica Romano Ranieri, Deruta, 2018.



Fig. 2.9. Painted tile after firing. Photo from course at Scuola d'arte Ceramica Romano Ranieri, Deruta, 2018.

It is noteworthy that, in the creation of maiolica, a workshop's relationship to community and the landscape plays a significant role. In particular, the sanctuary of the Madonna dei Bagni is connected to the landscape surrounding it because of the

materials of maiolica: resources like clay, wood, and the specific minerals used to make pigments were and are still linked not only to various specific parts of the landscape, but also to places and people within the immediate community and communities at a distance. Because the production of maiolica is a multi-step process involving complex materials, it ties the makers to the land and to the people around them, requiring not only personal knowledge about the land, but communal knowledge about the place and its local practices. The use of maiolica for personal devotional purposes also enhances ties between those involved in the elaborate production process. It is significant not only that makers use local materials, but that they are contributing to a local cult involving people and miracles that occurred in the area. As such, the church of the Madonna dei Bagni, covered in maiolica ex-voto tiles, is a testament to centuries of the community working together to produce this complex art form. The sanctuary is not only a spiritual sacred space, but a material sacred space for maiolica production. It is this combination of civic and spiritual space that makes the sanctuary radiate with complex meaning.

The process for leaving a maiolica ex-voto at the Madonna dei Bagni

Prior to taking any of the steps outlined above in producing a maiolica ex-voto, there is today a specific process which must be followed to create a tile that will be placed in the Madonna dei Bagni. First, a miracle must occur or a prayer must be answered. The devotee then goes to the caretakers of the shrine to ask permission to create a tile. After the request is approved by the caretakers, the priest must approve. The votary

then goes to a local maiolica artist in Deruta to commission the work. The two have a conversation about what occurred and agree on an image that will appropriately narrate the story. Sometimes photographs are used as a reference to specific elements which are to be included. The artist then draws up a sketch which, once approved by the votary, is transferred to the tile via pouncing, and the process described above is then followed to make the tile. Once the tile is completed and the artist is paid (the most popular artist in Deruta today charges \$100 for a tile), the votary takes the ex-voto to the caretakers of the church. This can happen at any point during the year and does not necessarily need to correspond to a particular holiday. The tiles are then added to the church walls by the caretakers where the space is available.¹⁴⁵ Although it is unknown how this process unfolded before the twentieth century, we know from the very beginning of the cult that ex-votos were commonly left on feast days—for example the first ex-voto dedicated by Christofano and his wife was left at the oak tree on the feast day of the Madonna del Carmine.¹⁴⁶

The maiolica ex-voto process indicates a relationship not just between the devotees and the Virgin Mary and/or God (a vow made), but also between the devotees and the maiolica workshops (an ex-voto commissioned), and their relationships with God (for example, prayers said with the firing of each kiln) to be able to produce the ex-votos. In the past as at present, the visual records of miracles

¹⁴⁵ The above information is based on interviews conducted in Deruta in 2018 and 2019.

¹⁴⁶ Guaitini, Grazia and Tullio Seppilli. 1983. “L’irruzione del negativo e l’intervento del soprannaturale nello spazio e nel tempo quotidiano: la fondazione del culto e il corpus di ex-voto in maiolica della Madonna dei Bagni” in *Gli Ex-voto in maiolica della Chiesa della Madonna dei Bagni a Casalina presso Deruta*. 1. ed. Firenze: Nuova Guaraldi, 12.

or answered prayers cannot be memorialized “on a whim.” Rather, they necessitate much planning on the part of the community. It is these threads of connection that create every single ex-voto, and so produce an intricate web materialized in hundreds of tiles over time.

Additional Considerations

Ever since the original ex-votos were all copied onto durable maiolica tiles in 1687, nearly all ex-votos which have been left at the Madonna dei Bagni have used maiolica. It is important to point out that the Madonna dei Bagni ex-votos share the same medium with the miraculous image of the Madonna and Child between the branches of the tree. It could be spiritually significant that the ex-votos are made of the same material as the revered image of the Madonna and Child. They are made of clay, a material known for its humble origins and for its biblical associations to humankind’s relationship to God. But the fact that the tree is also considered holy, and is encased at the main altar along with the image of the Madonna and Child, leads one to wonder why the ex-votos are not still made of paint on wood. The answer is partially linked to the durability of maiolica in comparison to wood. Maiolica was also the obvious choice for the *derutesi* to create ex-votos to fill their holy site, as this was the sustaining industry of the town since the Middle Ages. It made economic sense to utilize a material so readily present in the community rather than, say, wax or paper. It should also be noted that although *tavolette* originally were used, the images painted on the maiolica tiles are not a ceramic attempt to reproduce the aesthetic of a

painting. Rather, the makers embraced their technique, as seen in the way the early artists utilized swift, decisive brushstrokes. They also included molded frames in a variety of shapes—while frames are normally not used with humble *tavolette*. The process of maiolica-making was important to the artists and the commissioners, and the form of the votive as a work of maiolica was emphasized, thereby promoting an industry for which Deruta was (and still is) known. The local art form of maiolica highlights the local roots of this particular cult.

Additionally, perhaps this medium was and is the choice of devotees based on their aesthetic preferences. I believe one reason the tradition of tiles is continued today by the local community is to create a visually cohesive body of images in a medium that is very familiar and prominent in the visual and cultural landscape of the town and that probably aligns with the aesthetic sensibilities of many if not most of the community members. In addition, although styles have varied throughout the centuries, overall, the tiles function not just individually in the space, but collectively to form a miracle book written onto the church walls. Unlike the overcrowded church of Santissima Annunziata in Florence in 1630 (see Chapter 1), the hundreds of *ex-votos* in the Madonna dei Bagni are displayed in an orderly fashion along the walls—in line with both Counter Reformation and Second Vatican Council reforms for how popular devotion should manifest inside the sanctioned space of a church or shrine.

Material and Image

As with paper or wood, the combination of material and image enhances the meaning of a maiolica ex-voto. Gary Vikan's "Byzantine Pilgrimage Art" discusses *eulogiae*, or blessings, in the form of ampullae—small pilgrim flasks—created between the fifth and seventh centuries AC.¹⁴⁷ Although *eulogiae* could be produced in various forms and could come from various sacred sites, of particular interest to Vikan are those made of clay from the Holy Land, which were stamped with a related holy image and filled with oil, water or earth which had been sanctified by contact with someone or something holy. This combination of material and image resulted in amulet-like power. Vikan discusses how the materiality of the clay was itself important as it was a physical part of the Holy Land. He goes on to explain that the images impressed on the ampullae were also, in and of themselves, valued for miraculous powers.¹⁴⁸ Meaning was created through both material and image. These ideas can be related to the material nature of maiolica ex-votos and the images painted on them. The material of maiolica produces a specific visuality. The use of color on the maiolica ex-votos in the church of the Madonna dei Bagni, for example, is an important part of the iconographic identity of these images. This section will address a selection of tiles from the seventeenth century to present day in order to

¹⁴⁷ Vikan, Gary. 1982. *Byzantine Pilgrimage Art*. Washington, D.C: Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University.

¹⁴⁸ Another example of *eulogiae* are those associated with Saint Simeon Stylites (c.390-459), an ascetic who lived on top of a pillar in Syria. Followers consumed tokens which had been made from the earth around his pillar and had been pressed with his image in order to cure any type of disease. See Gary Vikan. 1989. "Ruminations on Edible Icons: Originals and Copies in the Art of Byzantium." *Studies in the History of Art* 20: 47–59.

unpack the visual language that has been used on the tiles and how what is depicted is bound to the materiality of maiolica.

Beginnings: The First Tile

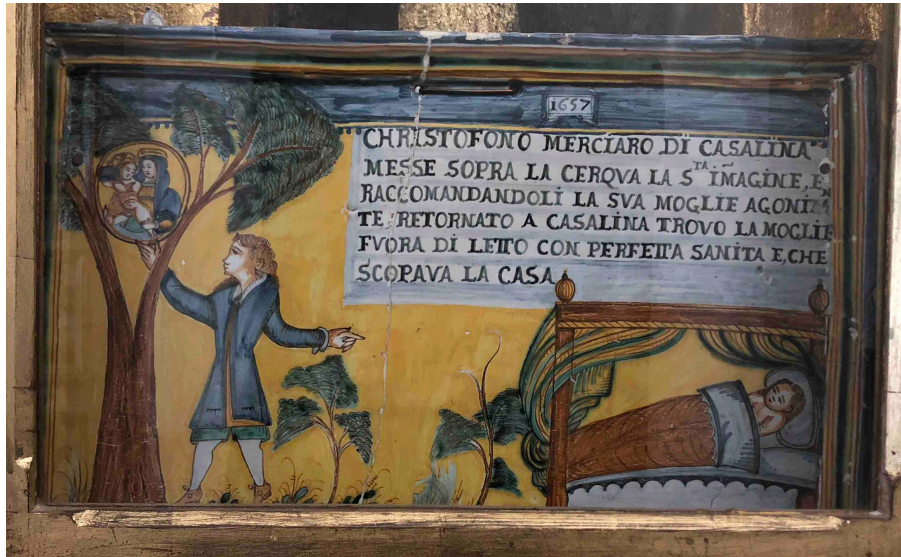


Fig. 2.10. First tile made for the Madonna dei Bagni, 1657. Date of production: 1687.

The first maiolica ex-voto made for the church of the Madonna dei Bagni is a representation of the original miracle granted by the venerated image of the Madonna and Child painted on the bottom of a fragmented ceramic cup (fig. 2.10).¹⁴⁹ The miracle scene, measuring 50 x 34 cm, is painted primarily in blue, yellow, green, orange and manganese hues which, as aforementioned, tend to be the traditional colors used in maiolica painting in Deruta. Like a painting, the scene is depicted

¹⁴⁹ Although this tile depicts the first miracle attributed to the Madonna dei Bagni, it is not the oldest ex-voto tile in the Madonna dei Bagni; one tile predates the existence of the church by one year (1656).

within a molded frame. At the very top of the composition, there is a blue banner with a fringe bearing the date 1657. This is the year the miracle occurred, and in this case, does not coincide with the year the tile was created, which was in 1687 when all painted ex-votos were remade as maiolica tiles. The top right-hand side of the scene contains a brief description of the miracle, written within a cartouche. It states: “Christofono, merchant of Casalina, put the Holy Image in the oak tree and prayed for his wife who was in agony. Returning to Casalina, he found his wife out of bed in perfect health sweeping the house.”¹⁵⁰

The composition focuses on clear depictions of events which can be easily read, regardless of the text. It portrays Christofano gesturing to the maiolica image of the Madonna and Child placed in a tree with one hand. The miraculous fragment with the Madonna and Child is magnified, likely for the sake of clarity and narrative effectiveness, since depicting it to scale would render it illegible. This enlarged perspective of the miraculous image continued to be repeated in all subsequent tiles.

While Christofano looks and gestures to the Madonna and Child in the tree with one hand, his other hand directs attention to his sick wife in a canopied bed depicted on the right. This all takes place within a forested scene in front of a yellow background. Again, the realism of the subject is sacrificed to clarify the narrative in the limited space of the tile, with an emphasis on the legibility of the image rather

¹⁵⁰ *Christofono merciaro di Casalina messe sopra la cerqua la Sta Imagine e raccomandandoli la sua moglie agonizante retornato a Casalina trovo la moglie fuora di letto con perfetta sanita e che scopava la casa.*

than a naturalistic depiction. A linear representation of time is not important to the artist or patron; Christofano places the image of the Madonna and Child in the tree at the same moment he gestures to his sick wife in bed. In reality, according to the recorded history of the church from archives, these two events happened at distinctly different times and spaces, yet they happen in the same instance on the tile in a synchronic and syntopic narrative where different moments in time and space are depicted together. The written narrative flashes forward to a description of the healing that would occur after Christofano's prayer was made. This absence of linear time is an element common in many ex-voto paintings. For example, the scene of a car crash in modern ex-votos is coupled with a thankful worshipper kneeling next to the scene of the accident in front of the image of the Madonna dei Bagni, even though it would have been impossible for the two events to have happened simultaneously.

Meaning-Making through Compositional Elements

Two compositional elements present in the first tile which continue to be repeated in later tiles must be pointed out here: the yellow background and the blue banner. In Christofano's tile, the whole scene occurs in front of a bright yellow background—recalling golden backgrounds of Byzantine mosaics, icons, enamels, and Gothic altarpieces. Gold, or in this case yellow, was not meant to merely represent richness but a divine realm in which the supernatural dwells. It is noteworthy that the early tiles chose not to represent a realistic blue sky as was commonplace in seventeenth century painting of the time—but one of golden yellow—signifying the miraculous

occurring in daily life. In some cases, blue does appear at the image borders, though these often also incorporate a burst of yellow radiating outward from the cult image. An example of this can be seen in a tile dating to 1690 (fig. 2.11). This image depicts several women crossing a river (likely the nearby Tiber) in a boat. One of the women is shown falling out of the boat into the water during the crossing. The other three women appear to be kneeling before the Madonna dei Bagni, hands clasping rosaries. The Madonna dei Bagni appears miraculously before them in the water, depicted in her oak tree upon a candlelit altar. Bright yellow rays radiate outward from the Madonna, merging with the blue sky at the top of the composition. The scene indicates the precise moment in which the holy image was invoked and appeared to save this woman from drowning in the river. Here, yellow is used to indicate sacred energy erupting in an earthly setting. In this way, sacred space and time is indicated on the tiles through the use of the color yellow.



Fig. 2.11. Ex-voto showing a woman saved from drowning while crossing a river, 1690. Image sourced from Giulio Busti, *Gli Ex-Voto in Maiolica della Chiesa della Madonna dei Bagni di Deruta* (1983).

Another pictorial allusion to sacred time that is indicated on the early tiles is by the inclusion of veils or curtains painted into the miraculous scene. In Christofano's tile, a fringed blue banner is suspended at the top of the composition. On later tiles, an actual curtain or combination of banner and curtain are employed. The use of veils and curtains in relation to miraculous images was widespread in the early modern period on the Italian peninsula. The veiling of a miraculous image could be in direct relation to the Church's attempt to control devotion to it. For example, the miraculous image of the Virgin Mary in the church of the Santissima Annunziata in Florence was only uncovered on rare occasions and for extremely influential devotees. This unveiling theatrically amplified the perceived power of the image. Veiling was indicated not only through the actual veil or curtain used to cover an image, but also in the framing and architecture surrounding it.¹⁵¹ A noteworthy example of unveiling that survives today is that of the fresco of the *Madonna del Parto* by Piero della Francesca in Monterchi (fig. 2.12). In this image, two angels flank a heavily pregnant Virgin Mary. Each angel holds open the curtains of an ermine-lined tent, or tabernacle, in which the Virgin is standing. This unveiling gesture is repeated in the opening of her dress, revealing her in what seems to be the final moments before giving birth. Here Mary herself becomes the veil—she is like the Tabernacle tent or the Ark of the Covenant which was also covered by a veil.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Holmes, Megan. 2013. *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 211-255.

¹⁵² For a detailed discussion on Mary as the Ark see Sarah Jane Boss. 2007. *Mary the Complete Resource*. London: Continuum, 2-3.

The imagery of the curtain or veil, particularly that which is pulled back, signifies something miraculous to behold— a theophany.¹⁵³



Fig. 2.12. Piero della Francesca, *Madonna del Parto*, fresco. Monterchi. Image in the public domain.
Photo credit: <https://www.wga.hu/html/p/piero/3/10parto.html>

An example of this unveiling can be seen in a maiolica tile depicting a woman kneeling before the altar of the Madonna dei Bagni with a horse just behind her (fig. 2.13). The implication could be that she was attacked by or thrown from the horse, or

¹⁵³ For a focused account on the rich symbolism of the veil see Johann Konrad Eberlein. 1983. “The Curtain in Raphael’s Sistine Madonna.” *The Art Bulletin* (New York, N.Y.) 65 (1): 61–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043079.1983.10788049>.

simply requested healing for her animal, who now kneels along with the woman in front of the miraculous image. The Madonna and Child sit atop the altar, embraced by the branches of the tree and flanked by two lit candles. Light, however, radiates outward not from the candles but from the image of the Madonna and Child in golden rays which pass onto the figures of the woman and the horse kneeling before them. A heavy green curtain is pulled to the right-hand side of the scene to reveal both the miraculous image as well as the miracle which has occurred. A cartouche directly under the hung curtain reads “V.F.G.A” -- *votum fecit gratiam accepit* – vow made, grace received. The date, 1690, is inscribed below this cartouche. This scene is set within a green and yellow molded and painted frame. The back hooves of the horse extend onto the frame—showing how the miraculous scene extends into the realm of the viewer.



Fig. 2.13. Ex-voto from the Madonna dei Bagni, 1690.

The use of curtains on the ex-voto tiles at the church of the Madonna dei Bagni are to my knowledge the only case in which ex-votos reference veils in this fashion. The same can be said for the use of the color yellow as a background. *Tavolette*, for instance, do not utilize yellow or gold backgrounds as they are generally painted in a more realistic style (with blue sky) and made of humble materials (not including gold). The maiolica ex-votos made in Deruta are capable of conveying a different type of message via their medium as well as what is painted on them. The idea of veiling extends to the frames which make up part of the tiles. The frames function as windows into a sacred stage revealed by the unveiling of the curtain.

Another compositional element to note in these images is the reoccurring depiction of a brick archway. What is the significance of this element, continuously repeated in dozens of ex-votos in the Madonna dei Bagni? One particular tile may be key to understanding the importance of this seemingly decorative addition. It dates to 1662 and shows a woman kneeling below the image of the Madonna dei Bagni with an infant in her arms (fig. 2.14). Behind her, a man kneels at a prie-dieu, rosary in hand. The scene includes the yellow background, blue banner, curtain, and brick archway to the right of the composition. The accompanying text tells the striking story of this unnamed woman. Having given birth to a stillborn, she came with her husband to the church of the Madonna dei Bagni and placed the baby on the altar, where miraculously he was brought to life. Given the miracle is meant to have happened inside the church structure, at the very altar of the Madonna dei Bagni, I

believe this image may be read as being inside the church. The open door and brick archway repeat architectural themes still visible inside the church today (fig. 2.15).



Fig. 2.14. Ex-voto depicting an infant brought to life. Madonna dei Bagni, 1662. Twentieth century copy of the seventeenth century original.



Fig. 2.15. Interior of the sanctuary of the Madonna dei Bagni, Deruta.

This brick archway also appears in other ex-votos, such as exorcisms (fig. 2.16). While we cannot exclude that at least some exorcisms did occur inside the church structure before the sacred image of the Madonna and Child at the altar, the depiction of the church interior becomes a bit more confusing when shown in ex-votos depicting childbirth (fig. 2.17). It is unlikely that women were giving birth inside the Madonna dei Bagni. Instead, these types of images suggest a direct link between women in moments of crisis and the sacred image of the Madonna and Child that resides inside the church structure. While they may not be physically in that space, the synecdochic representation of the church through the archway was meant to link their prayers with that specific sacred place and the image upon which their soul's eyes were fixed with hopes for salvation.



Fig. 2.16. Ex-voto from the Madonna dei Bagni depicting an exorcism, second half of the seventeenth century.



Fig. 2.17. Ex-voto from the Madonna dei Bagni depicting a woman giving birth, 1698. Image from Antonio Santantoni, *Ex Voto: Arte e Fede nel Santuario della Madonna del Bagno in Casalina* (2010).

Meaning-Making through Stylistic Choices

The images painted on these ex-votos can be discussed in terms of both content and style. First, it must be noted that although the Madonna dei Bagni has been in continuous use since 1657, most historic tiles date from a period between 1657 and 1700 when 288 tiles were dedicated. From 1700 to 1800 there were 86 made; and then from 1800 to 1900 only three were made.¹⁵⁴ The earliest tiles often show sick figures in a canopied bed, much like the first tile. Other non-specific dedications depict kneeling figures—often holding a rosary—before the image of the Madonna

¹⁵⁴ The extreme decrease in tiles made during the nineteenth century likely has much to do with the wane in maiolica production at the time due to economic decline in the region of Umbria.

and Child in the tree with hands clasped in prayer. Other common themes from the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries include surviving through a number of perilous situations such as childbirth, demon possession, accidents involving animals, firearms, falling from trees, buildings or into bodies of water, attacks from bandits and other brawls, fire, lightning strikes, and time in prison. Such images demonstrate dangers in quotidian life during this historical period.

The twentieth century saw a new boom in ex-voto dedications with 233 made between 1900 and 2000, and another 58 made between 2000 and 2010.¹⁵⁵ Since 2010 there have been at least 40 more dedications with more continuously added each year, making the cult nearly as popular today as it was at its inception. While most tiles still use the traditional colors of yellow, orange, blue, green and manganese, the innovations of the twentieth century caused an explosion of diversity, including both content and stylistic changes. Tiles began to represent aspects of modernity and their dangers as evidenced by representations of bicycles, motorcycles, cars, trains, airplanes as well as electricity, hospital operating tables and, most recently, COVID-19.

Stylistic changes in the twentieth century include diverse color schemes, ceramic techniques (including the reintroduced use of lusterware), and a more naturalistic rendering of subject matter, including individualized features of people,

¹⁵⁵ This resurgence of ex-voto dedications can be tied to the revival of maiolica production in the twentieth century.

all of which reflect trends in figurative art throughout the twentieth century. Of particular note are the portraits of individuals with unique identifying features on the tiles, and the increasing appearance of tiles signed by the artists, reflecting individualism brought on by the twentieth century.

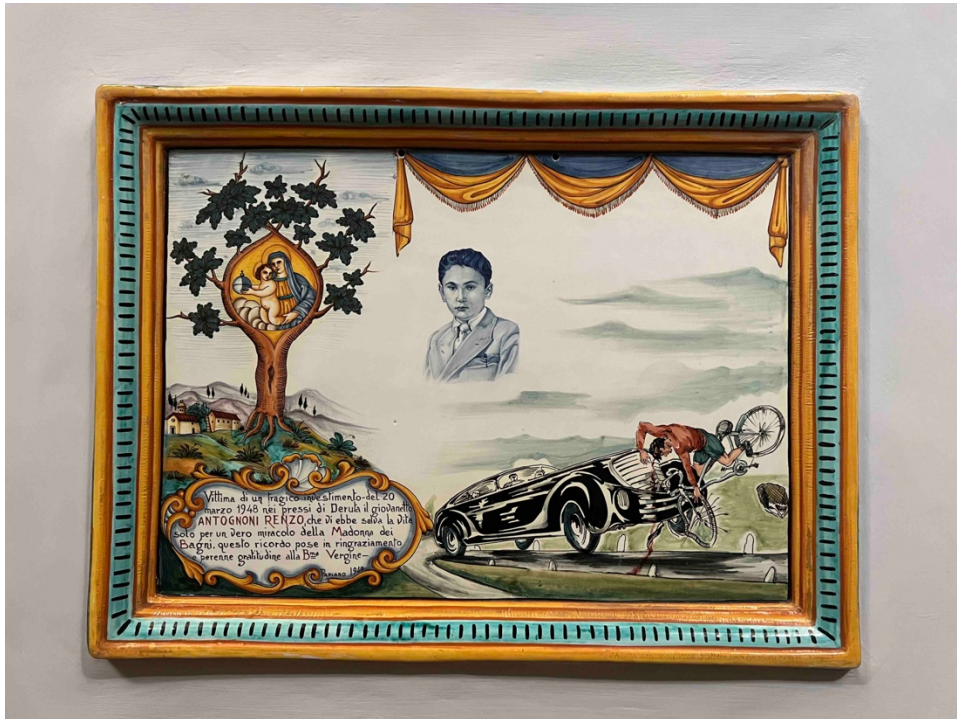


Fig. 2.18. Ex-voto depicting a car and bicycle accident. Madonna dei Bagni, 1948.

One example of these changes can be seen in a tile dated to 1948 depicting a collision between a car and a bicycle (fig. 2.18). This tile utilizes colors not traditionally found on *derutese* maiolica such as red (*rosso-carminio*) and cobalt blue. It also uses the dramatic perspective of the car to highlight its impact on the bicycle and the cyclist. A monochrome portrait of the patron (probably copied from a black and white photograph) involved in the miracle is included. Unlike the hundreds of

tiles which adhere to the traditional conventions, this tile is an example of an individualized ex-voto from the twentieth century. Although it differs visually from other tiles, the ex-voto still includes both a prominent curtain at the top of the tile (like the Christofono scene) and the traditional iconographic element of the Madonna and Child in the tree. In this tile, time is suspended and space collapsed as the image of the accident, the portrait of the individual, and the Madonna and Child in the tree appear simultaneously within the space of the tile. Even though text is included, it is not necessary to read the text to understand the meaning of the image or who was involved. Although some parts of twentieth century tiles show naturalistic depictions, naturalism is always secondary to narrative clarity, like in the original ex-votos from the seventeenth century. Arguably, narrative clarity is the most important compositional element for all tiles across time.

As seen in figure 2.18, photorealism could easily be utilized by the talented ceramic masters who created and continue to create these tiles. Yet, throughout the church, only approximately fifteen out of over 300 tiles made since the advent of photography use this style of portraiture. In addition, just one tile uses actual photographs in combination with the painted image of the Madonna and Child (fig. 2.19). This square tile is dominated by the central painted image of the Madonna dei Bagni in the oak tree set among a hilly landscape. The Madonna is flanked by two photographic images printed on ceramic set into the tile. These are presumably a before-and-after of a healing, which is referred to in an inscription on the right: “I

was born suffering, my recovery was a prize for the faith of my father and mother in the Madonna dei Bagni.”¹⁵⁶ Out of hundreds of tiles which line the church's walls, this is the *only* example which utilizes photography directly.



Fig. 2.19. Ex-voto from the Madonna dei Bagni incorporating photographs, 1960.

Despite a significant number of individualized changes in the past century, the style of the seventeenth century tends to be preferred. This is demonstrated by the community's selection of the artist to create their tiles. After a theft from the church in 1980, the Monotti family (Claudio and his children Carmen and Luigi) recreated the lost tiles and restored broken ones. Their talent in working in a style that

¹⁵⁶ *Naqui sofferente la mia guarigione fu premio alla fiducia di papà e mamma nella Madonna dei Bagni P.G.R. Caviglioni Loredana. Papiano 1960.*

complements seventeenth-century tiles may be a reason why Carmen, who continues the family trade, is the most popular practicing ex-voto artist in Deruta today. An example of her work can be seen in a recent tile dating to 2013 in which the clothing, color scheme and immediacy of the subject matter devoid of naturalistic perspective harkens back to the traditional style (fig. 2.20). A man and woman kneel in seventeenth century attire in front of the Madonna and Child in the oak tree against a yellow background, while to the right a sick figure lays in a canopied bed. To the left, the acronym PGR is written, along with the month and year of the miracle. The subject matter is almost identical to that of the first tile. There is no accompanying written description, but creative license is employed through the depiction of the hands of God reaching down toward the bed as rays of blue and red healing energy radiate down onto the sick person. This personalized element is added to the typical trope of the healing ex-voto in the Madonna dei Bagni, promoting the notion that each tile is indeed a unique, personalized expression of devotion.

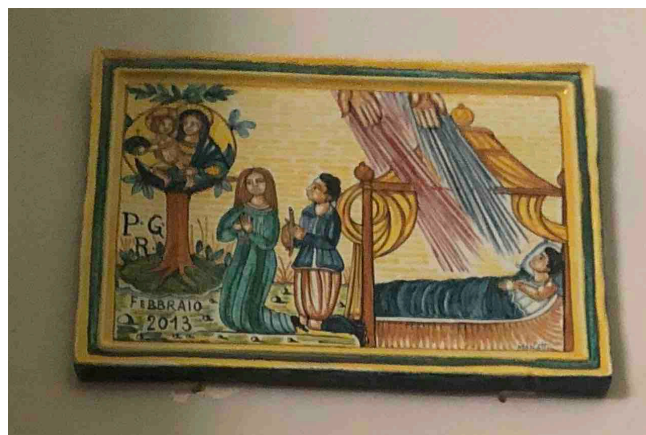


Fig. 2.20 . Ex-voto from the Madonna dei Bagni, 2013.

Why is this stylistic choice that harkens back to the seventeenth century preferred today when photorealism or actual photographic images could be employed? When a photograph is inserted into the picture or copied in a photorealistic style onto the tile, it acts as an interruption in the pictorial scene. On the one hand it shows the technical capacity or the artist's talent for and ability to create realistic works of art. On the other hand, through contrast, it highlights the artistic choice in utilizing a specific traditional style to depict the miracles and the Madonna. This artistic style, combined with the renewed use of seventeenth century attire even in the most contemporary tiles gives a continuation to the miraculous over the centuries. Undated tiles could easily represent miracles three years ago or 300 years ago. The ex-votos in the Madonna dei Bagni, above all, are not merely artifacts from a past culture, but active parts of a continuing tradition, functioning as witnesses to miraculous events which continue to occur. The images painted on the maiolica ex-votos in a cohesive style speak across time as part of the living cult of the Madonna dei Bagni, with deep roots and strong connections to the origins of this tradition in the seventeenth century. Ex-voto tiles are not viewed as some relic of a lost faith, but memories of miracles shared by the local community, a living, functional part of life which continues to develop in the present day as more tiles are laid into the walls of the church.

Conclusion

This chapter has addressed how meaning is made in the maiolica ex-voto tradition of the Madonna dei Bagni cult through material and image. I have analyzed the process of maiolica, demonstrating the importance of its material aspects that link it to the community and identity of the people who make and commission these ex-votos. I then looked at a selection of images painted on the maiolica, to examine how stylistic, compositional, and iconographic choices have deepened the meaning of these objects. Like ampullae discussed by Vikan, it is this investigation of both material *and* image that gives significance to these ex-votos.

The materiality of ex-votos must be considered in relation to the materiality of the cult image or saint for which they were created. For this reason, the following chapter will continue to address materiality in relation to the cult image of the Madonna and Child in the church of the Madonna dei Bagni—exploring how this image was and is used to create sacred space.

Chapter 3

Creating Sacred Space through the Virgin Mary



Fig. 3.1. Cult image of the Madonna and Child in the church of the Madonna dei Bagni, Deruta.

Introduction

A framed seventeenth-century maiolica image of the Virgin and Child between the branches of an oak tree is placed at the main altar of the Madonna dei Bagni (fig. 3.1). The image was originally painted on the interior portion of *una tazza da bere*, a small bowl or cup with a handle used to drink. Most likely, it was left near the now-lost spring for which the Madonna del Bagno was named. Since the cup broke several

times over the years, today what is left is a fragmentary image of the Madonna and Child. It currently measures a couple of inches across and in the late twentieth century it was restored by Claudio Monotti, who filled in the lacunae with black and white paint. What remains of the original image is painted in the traditional maiolica colors: blue, green, yellow, orange and manganese. It depicts a half-length Madonna dressed in yellow and green with a traditional blue mantle. She holds an outsized Christ Child, who is unclothed, likely to emphasize his humanity, as was often done in Renaissance imagery.¹⁵⁷ Both mother and infant are decorated with yellow halos. Mary cradles and looks to the Christ Child lovingly as he gazes back at her while embracing a blue orb symbolizing his control over and salvation of the terrestrial realm. The theological message is clear—it is through Mary’s humanity that Christ is made flesh and able to save the world.¹⁵⁸ How does this seemingly simple pocket-sized pottery fragment create sacred space?

Chapter 2 considered the materiality of the ex-votos in the Madonna dei Bagni and their significance; this chapter will continue this trajectory by focusing on the physicality of the Virgin Mary and how she and her image created and continues to create sacred space. To unpack these concepts, I will begin with a discussion of the Virgin Mary’s role in sacred space-claiming for the Roman Catholic Church as a whole. I will then address cases in which the local community claims space as sacred

¹⁵⁷ See Bynum, Caroline Walker. 1986. “The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg.” *Renaissance Quarterly* 39 (3): 399–439. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2862038> and Steinberg, Leo. 1996. *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*. 2nd edition, revised and expanded. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

utilizing imagery of the Virgin Mary, an example of this being the Madonna and Child in the church of Madonna dei Bagni. Through this example, I argue that sacred space is claimed not only through the miracle-working image of the Virgin Mary, but also through the oak tree enshrined along with the image at the main altar of the church.

Defining Sacred Space

What makes a space sacred? Let us first consider the definition of the term “sacred”. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, sacred in reference to places can be defined as: “set apart for or dedicated to some religious purpose, and hence entitled to veneration or religious respect; made holy by association with a god or other object of worship; consecrated, hallowed.”¹⁵⁹ This definition infers that there is a distinct difference between sacred and profane space. The foundation of the concept of sacred space was developed by the prominent sociologist Émile Durkheim in his consideration of the division between the sacred and the profane.¹⁶⁰ According to Durkheim, the sacred is distinctly separated from the banal of the profane world. Although seminal, his vision of a clear-cut dichotomy is an oversimplification of the two areas of life, which tend to be much more interrelated. Upon further investigation, the historian R.W. Scribner concluded that the sacred and the profane

¹⁵⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “sacred (*adj. & n.*),” December 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3493801911>.

¹⁶⁰ Durkheim, Émile, Carol. Cosman, and Mark Sydney. Cladis. 2001. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

are not distinct zones, but rather areas which may overlap—there exist places where the sacred is experienced within the profane.¹⁶¹ This can be seen in the ceramic-making production described in Chapter 2, in which prayers were said throughout the maiolica process to create products for the secular economy. One may also consider that many of the miracles commemorated in the Madonna dei Bagni concern incidents of daily “secular” life that was transformed thanks to the intervention of Christ and Mary. The historian Edward Muir has argued that the distinction between the sacred and profane is particularly blurred in Italian cities by holy images which have a tendency to extend outside of the church space—a concept that resonates with the Madonna dei Bagni which began as an image cult at the side of the road, not inside of a church structure.¹⁶²

If God is omnipresent, as Christians believe, then all space is potentially sacred. Like God, saints also have the capacity for omnipresence although their bodily relics became focalized points of spiritual power. In the case of Mary, her capacity for omnipresence is particularly poignant because she left no bodily remains on earth as she is believed to have been assumed into heaven.¹⁶³ Images of the Virgin

¹⁶¹ Scribner, R. W. 2003. “Cosmic Order and Daily Life: Sacred and Secular in Pre-Industrial German Society.” In *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany*. United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

¹⁶² Muir, Edward. 1981. *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press. For a detailed discussion of relevant literature see Will Coster and Andrew Spicer. 2005. *Sacred Space in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1-16.

¹⁶³ Jugie, Martin. 1944. *La mort et l'assomption de la Sainte Vierge: étude historico-doctrinale*. Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca apostolica vaticana.

Mary, in lieu of bodily relics, allowed the Virgin Mary to create sacred space virtually anywhere.

The Virgin Mary and the Creation of Sacred Space in Italy

To understand better how Marian cults like the Madonna dei Bagni created sacred space in Italy, it is necessary to look at how the cult of the Virgin Mary developed historically. The first textual mention of Mary appears in the Gospels written between c.66–100 CE.¹⁶⁴ In these texts Mary is described as the mother of Christ in episodes of his life. While the Virgin Mary appears only peripherally in the gospels as a supporting character to the life of Christ, her role in Catholicism was increasingly highlighted in the following centuries. Stories of her life were written to demonstrate her importance in the incarnation and salvation of humanity. There was also an increased emphasis on her perpetual virginity—which was further proof of Christ’s divinity. In the following centuries, texts such as the *Protoevangelium of James*, *Homilies of Proclus*, the *Akathistos Hymn*, the *Gospel of the Pseudo-Matthew* and later *Meditations on the Life of Christ* and *The Golden Legend*, expanded stories and allegories about the Virgin.¹⁶⁵ Visualizing the Virgin Mary gained importance

¹⁶⁴ See Matthew 1:1-2:23; Luke 1:26-56; Luke 2:1-52; Mark 3:31-5; Mark 6:3; John 2:1-12; John 7:41-2; John 8:41; John 19:25-7; Acts 1:14; Revelation 12:1-6.

¹⁶⁵ See Lily C. Vuong. 2019. *The Protevangelium of James*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books; Nicholas Conostas and Proclus. 2003. *Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity Homilies 1-5, Texts and Translations*. Leiden; Brill; Egon Wellesz. 1957. “The Akathistos hymn.” Copenhagen: Munksgaard; Brandon W. Hawk. 2020. *The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew and the Nativity of Mary*. 1st ed. United Kingdom: The Lutterworth Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv14gpjds>;

following the Third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431 CE.¹⁶⁶ It was at this point that the Church proclaimed Mary as Theotokos, or God-Bearer.¹⁶⁷ This move solidified her importance and necessity in Christian doctrine: she was the vessel by which God became human through Christ and thus sanctified the human realm with his presence. As such, Mary was the means through which sacred space could be born. It was also at this point that the first major church dedicated to Mary was constructed—Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome.¹⁶⁸ With the construction of a major church dedicated to Mary, her role in the creation of sacred space was firmly established. After this point the veneration of Mary became an essential element in Christianity. The next major development happened at the end of Iconoclasm in 842 CE when imagery was deemed necessary by the Catholic Church. In the Byzantine tradition, Mary was placed in church apses as a clear and direct eucharistic

Bonaventure, and Johannes. 2018. *Meditations on the Life of Christ the Short Italian Text*. Edited by Sarah McNamer. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press. and Jacobus de Voragine, Duffly Eamon, and William Granger. Ryan. 2012. *The Golden Legend Readings on the Saints*. Course Book. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400842056>. See also Luigi Gambero. 1999. *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*. 1st ed. San Francisco: Ignatius Press; and Luigi Gambero. 2005. *Mary in the Middle Ages: The Blessed Virgin Mary in the Thought of Medieval Latin Theologians*. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press. Leena Mari Peltomaa. 2001. *The Image of the Virgin Mary in the Akathistos Hymn*. Leiden; Brill. Nicklas, Tobias, and Jozef Verheyden. 2018. *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Apocrypha*. Edited by Andrew F. Gregory and C. M. (Christopher Mark) Tuckett. First edition. New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press.

¹⁶⁶ Parly, Geri. 2017. "The Origins of Marian Art: The Evolution of Marian Imagery in the Western Church until AD 431" in *Mary the Complete Resource*. London; Continuum, 123.

¹⁶⁷ See Sarah Jane Boss. 2007. "The Title Theotokos" and Richard Price. 2007. "Theotokos: The Title and its Significance in Doctrine and Devotion" in *Mary the Complete Resource*. London; Continuum.

¹⁶⁸ Krautheimer, Richard. 2000. *Rome: The Profile of a City, 312-1308*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 46-49.

connection.¹⁶⁹ With this iconographic development, Mary's place within physical and theological Church structures was solidified as was her image's role in the creation of sacred space.

Mary as *Ecclesia*

It is worth noting that Mary not only created sacred space, but was understood from an early time to *be* sacred space through her role as *Mater Ecclesia*.¹⁷⁰ Mary can be conceptualized as sacred space because she is the mother of God, having contained Christ in her womb. As such she has been referred to not only as a vessel, but also a tent and a sanctuary, among other terms.¹⁷¹ In the *Madonna dei Bagni* this concept of Mary as a sacred container is reiterated visually several times. The concept of Mary as the container of Christ is amplified in the cult image, which is itself painted on the base of a vessel made for drinking. This holy object is contained within a frame, which is in turn placed inside a glass case placed inside the niche at the altar which is contained inside the church structure. Just as Mary contained the body of the infant Christ, the church structure, also understood to be the body of Mary, contains the eucharist.

¹⁶⁹ Evangelatou, Maria. 2019. "Krater of Nectar and Altar of the Bread of Life: The Theotokos as Provider of the Eucharist in Byzantine Culture." In *The Reception of the Virgin in Byzantium*, 77–119. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108696791.005>.

¹⁷⁰ Papastavrou, H. 2000. "L'idée de l'Ecclesia et la scène de l'Annonciation. Quelques aspects" in *DchAE* 21, 227–240.

¹⁷¹ The Virgin Mary is referenced as a tent specifically in relation to the Jewish Tabernacle, and as a sanctuary in relation to the Jewish Temple and its Holy of Holies.

Marian Relics in the Western Tradition

Mary created sacred space for the Catholic Church through images and relics. In *The Cult of the Saints*, Peter Brown states: “The graves of saints—whether these were the solemn rock tombs of the Jewish patriarchs of the Holy Land or, in Christian circles, tombs, fragments of bodies or, even, physical objects that had made contact with these bodies—were privileged places, where the contrasted poles of Heaven and Earth met.”¹⁷² Even though Mary was not martyred and left no relics of flesh, bone, or blood on earth (due to the belief in her assumption into heaven), places that contained relics connected to her life became important destinations in the sacred landscape of Christianity.¹⁷³ In particular, they became part of the pilgrimage complex in the Holy Land, including locales such as Mary’s house in Nazareth where the Annunciation occurred, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, and the Church of the Assumption in Jerusalem. These spaces were part of a larger pilgrimage complex that traced the life of Christ and the saints across a sacred landscape. However, reaching these spaces from the European continent became increasingly difficult in the Middle Ages due to Islamic occupation. While Crusades tried to “take back” the Holy Land, pilgrimage locales across Europe grew in popularity. These European pilgrimage sites could contain a Biblical saint’s relics (like Saint James in

¹⁷² Brown, Peter. 1981. *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 3.

¹⁷³ First class relics (relics which come from the body) are limited to Mary’s hair and perhaps her breast milk. There are several locations on the European continent which her hair is venerated. Secondary relics are objects touched or used by the saint, such as clothing. See Roten, Johann. "Marian Relics." University of Dayton. Accessed January 28, 2024. <https://udayton.edu/imri/mary/r/relics.php>.

Compostela) or a local saint's relics (as with Saint Francis of Assisi); later it was more common for pilgrimage sites to be associated with a miraculous image of Mary or of a Marian apparition. The creation of a sacred landscape in Italy also became a literal movement of holy *land* to the Italian peninsula, as actual soil was brought from Jerusalem to various spaces in Italy.¹⁷⁴ There was an increase in these sites in the eleventh through twelfth centuries.¹⁷⁵

The transference of sacred space from the eastern Mediterranean to Italy included relics related to the Virgin Mary. The most important of these relics is that of the Holy House, today located in Loreto, Italy. According to legend, the Holy House of the Virgin Mary in Nazareth was miraculously transported across the Mediterranean by angels to Tersatto in modern day Croatia in 1291 (the same year Acre fell to the Muslims in the Holy Land, marking the end of Christian rule there). A few years later, in 1294, it moved again two more times in the province of Recanati on the Italian peninsula before it finally settled along a public road in 1295 on a spot

¹⁷⁴ When building the church of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme in Rome, soil from Jerusalem was brought in to cover the floor. When the visitor entered into the church, they were actually standing on the holy *land*. This is not the only instance of such a technique. The Camposanto in Pisa translates to the "holy field" and was created when a shipload of sacred soil was brought by crusaders in the twelfth century. In addition, believers manipulated a sacred landscape in such a way as to encompass areas that emulated the Holy Land. One example is the Sacri Monti in northern Italy made to mimic the stations of the cross in Jerusalem. Among other examples is the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Bologna, traditionally said to have been built in the fifth century but rebuilt in the eleventh century. See Kathryn Blair Moore. 2017. *The Architecture of the Christian Holy Land: Reception from Late Antiquity through the Renaissance*. 1st ed. New York: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316488362>.

¹⁷⁵ This type of replication continued on for centuries. Coleman and Elsner describe how in Wasingham in Norfolk a vision of Gabriel dictated that an exact replica of the holy house be built in that space. It was constructed and became known as "England's Nazareth"; visitors to the site were described as palmers, a term reserved for those who journeyed to the Holy Land. Coleman, Simon, and John. Elsner. 1995. *Pilgrimage: Past and Present in the World Religions*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 106.

that was later to become the town of Loreto.¹⁷⁶ The appearance of this important relic created a major pilgrimage destination on the Italian peninsula. The significance of this particular relic is due to its direct connection with the life of the Virgin Mary—venerated as the space in which the Annunciation took place.¹⁷⁷

Other Marian relics helped in the creation of a new sacred landscape on the European continent. These included objects such as the Virgin's robe in both of the cities of Aachen and Chartres, and in Italy, the Virgin's girdle in Prato, the Virgin's wedding ring in Chiusi (later moved to Perugia in 1473, where it remains today) and drops of the Virgin's breastmilk in Montevarchi.¹⁷⁸ These relics became not just points of localized devotion, but spaces which attracted pilgrims from further afield. Marian relics from the Holy Land were now tied to spaces on the Italian peninsula, creating a new sacred landscape. However, devotion to Mary was not just tied to a few relics. Many early images of the Virgin Mary were also looted to the European continent by Crusaders. The transference of sacred images of the Virgin Mary were

¹⁷⁶ Material evidence supports the legend that this relic did indeed come from the Holy Land as the house is made of limestone and cedar which are not materials indigenous to the Italian peninsula. It is likely that crusaders (some say a family known by the name Angeli or "angels") brought this relic brick by brick to Italy as the Holy Land was becoming inaccessible to Christians. Five small crosses made of red cloth, dating to the crusader period were discovered in a space below the house's window. These are symbols associated with crusader knights and may have been placed in the house when it was reconstructed on the site. See Giuseppe Santarelli. 2017. *Loreto in Art and History*. Bieffe S.p.a.: Recanati, 13-15.

¹⁷⁷ According to Pope John Paul II in 1993 the Sancta Casa di Loreto was the "foremost Shrine of international prestige devoted to the Virgin." Ibid, 35.

¹⁷⁸ Holmes, Megan. 2013. *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 33. For a discussion of bodily relics and contact relics see Caroline Walker Bynum. 2011. *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe*. New York: Zone Books, 131-139. The Virgin's robe and girdle were also said to be held as relics in Constantinople. See Simon Coleman. 2007. "Mary: Images and Objects" in *Mary the Complete Resource*. Sarah Jane Boss, ed. London; Continuum, 395-423.

used to claim Italy in particular as the new Holy Land. Image cults made the Virgin Mary available for devotion just as relics did for other saints, but while relics were generally tied to a limited number of specific places, images could be anywhere.¹⁷⁹ Indeed, images of the Virgin Mary began to appear seemingly everywhere on the Italian peninsula in the late medieval and early modern periods.

Marian Images

To understand the types of image cults that arose in the Middle Ages and early modern period in Italy, it is useful to look at the four categories of sacred images outlined by Gabrielle Paleotti in his treatise on images from 1582.¹⁸⁰ The first category of miraculous images can be understood as contact relics such as the *Veronica*—a cloth said to be imprinted with the face of Christ. The second category are images made by saints—usually paintings of the Virgin said to be made by Saint Luke or sculptures made by Nicodemus.¹⁸¹ Miraculous images of the Virgin Mary attributed to Saint Luke are among the earliest documented venerated images and

¹⁷⁹ It was not uncommon to have multiple examples of relics which were supposed to be unique, such as Veronica's veil, venerated in different locations. Such duplication undermined the authenticity of all relics. Images, however, had no such limitations.

¹⁸⁰ Paleotti, Gabriele, William McCuaig, and Paolo Prodi. 2012. *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images*. Translated by William McCuaig. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute.

¹⁸¹ An example of a miracle-working image allegedly sculpted by the biblical figure Nicodemus is the *Volto Santo*, depicting Christ on the cross as he saw it and as such became a direct link to that moment. It arrived in Lucca in 1200 and thus created the sacred space of the Crucifixion on Italian soil. See Garnett, Jane, and Gervase Rosser. 2013. *Spectacular Miracles: Transforming Images in Italy from the Renaissance to the Present*. London: Reaktion Books, 84-85.

appeared in both Constantinople and Rome.¹⁸² The third category of miraculous images discussed by Paleotti is the *acheiropoiēta*, or an image not made by human hands such as the Lateran Christ in Rome. Generally, these were images believed to have been completed by angels like the face of the Virgin at the church of the Santissima Annunziata in Florence.¹⁸³ The last category of miraculous images Paleotti mentions are those through which God performs miracles, such as the Virgin in the Holy House of Loreto, or that of the Madonna dei Bagni.¹⁸⁴ The first three categories of images require some type of credible provenance, linking images to a particular place and history. The last category, however, allows an image in any location to potentially develop miracle-working powers.

Marian images helped to create the sacred landscape in Italy in many ways. The earliest image cults of the Virgin Mary in Italy can be traced to Rome. While dating the beginning of veneration of these images proves difficult, it has continued from the Middle Ages to present day. There are five early miraculous images of the Virgin in Rome: *Salus Populi Romani* or *Regina Coeli* at Santa Maria Maggiore, the *Madonna of Santa Maria Nova* (previously in Santa Maria Antiqua), the *Madonna of the Pantheon*, the *Madonna della Clemenza* in Santa Maria in Trastevere and the

¹⁸² In Constantinople these included images of the Virgin at Hodegon, Blachernae and Chalcoprateia. See Cyril Mango. 2000. "Constantinople as Theotokoupolis" in *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art*. Ed. Maria Vassilaki. Milano: Skira, 17-25.

¹⁸³ According to legend the painting of the Annunciation was begun by a monk in 1252, but was completed by an angel. The image we see today was painted c. 1350 based upon an earlier version.

¹⁸⁴ Paleotti, 99-100.

Madonna di San Sisto (also known as *Santa Maria del Rosario*).¹⁸⁵ These five miraculous images became closely tied to their locations and communities in Rome in the Middle Ages through a complex web of rituals and processions. Many of these images were connected to churches that lie within the Aurelian Walls. While other Christian basilicas were constructed outside the walls of Rome due to their position over the gravesites of saints' bodies (such as the basilicas of Saint Peter, Paul, and Lawrence), the churches within the walls of Rome were dedicated to Mary and often revolved around images of the Virgin (such as Santa Maria Maggiore or the Pantheon), allowing the Roman Catholic Church to stake its claim on the interior city of Rome. Famously, an image of the Virgin Mary is said to have been paraded through Rome in 590 during a great plague to rid the city of the pestilence.¹⁸⁶ While there is some debate as to whether this really happened at such an early date, what is known for sure is that by the late Middle Ages processions through the streets with these images became a common tradition in Rome, demonstrating the Virgin's role in space-claiming, connection with the people, and protection of the city. Although Mary never lived in Italy, was not martyred, and left few material relics on earth, through these images she became one of the most important creators in the sacred landscape of Rome and in Italy overall.

¹⁸⁵ See Gerhard Wolf. 2005. "Icons and Sites. Cult images of the Virgin in mediaval Rome." in *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*. 1st ed. Florence: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315252674>; Belting, Hans, and E. F. N. Jephcott. 1994. *Likeness and Presence : A History of the Image before the Era of Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 312-23; and Holmes, Megan. 2013. *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 22-25.

¹⁸⁶ Holmes, 25.

Since Rome was the seat of the papacy, it set the standard for religious devotion in the Roman Catholic world. The extent of this influence is most noticeable on the Italian peninsula in places that were under papal rule or that were linked to pilgrimage routes to Rome. The region of Umbria, where the Madonna dei Bagni resides, was part of the papal territories until 1861 with the unification of Italy. Furthermore, the sanctuary of the Madonna dei Bagni was built on a main road connecting Perugia and Assisi to Rome, thereby linking devotional practices to that of the Papal States. Miraculous images of the Virgin Mary in Umbria developed predominately in rural locations in the early modern period, connecting devotional practices not only to Rome but also to localized traditions. This religious environment sets the scene for the appearance of the Madonna dei Bagni in the middle of the seventeenth century.

The Virgin and the Tree

The Madonna and Child in combination with a tree, like the Madonna dei Bagni, became increasingly popular in the early modern period. Why was the tree an important iconographical element? What is the significance of the tree theologically? How does the tree act as a proponent for space-claiming? This section will address these questions.

A well-known example of the association of Mary with a tree is the Madonna della Quercia in Viterbo, a famous Marian pilgrimage destination in central Italy with

a votive tradition dating to the early modern period.¹⁸⁷ In 1417, an image of the Madonna and Child painted on a roof tile (*tegola*) was placed in an oak tree outside the city of Viterbo. By 1467 it was reported to be working miracles. The story of the development of the shrine in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries is illustrated by frescoes inside the church structure painted between 1561 and 1574. According to texts as well as the frescoes, votive offerings were hung on the branches of the tree as testament to miracles which occurred both near Viterbo, and as far away as Siena and Rome. As ex-votos accumulated on and around the tree, the shrine grew in size.¹⁸⁸ Thousands of people spontaneously converged on the site in 1467, prompting legitimization of the cult by the papacy and the consecration of a church the same year. As previously outlined, the church of the Madonna dei Bagni developed in much the same way.

In the case of the Madonna dei Bagni, the first ex-voto tile shows Christofano di Filippo placing the image in the tree. Subsequent ex-votos show the branches of the tree embracing the image of the Madonna and Child. According to legend, this was the tree's reaction to the permanent placement of the holy image in its

¹⁸⁷ For all the following information see Attilio Caroli and Gianfranco Ciprini. 1993. *Gli Ex Voto di S. Maria della Quercia*, Cassa di Risparmio della Provincia di Viterbo.

¹⁸⁸ Following 1470, ex-votos are documented as wax and silver images and body parts as well as painted panels depicting miracles received or prayers answered. Today the wax votives have been lost to time, but some of the silver as well as 206 of the painted panels known as *tavolette* have been preserved in the ex-voto museum in the church of the Madonna della Quercia. For a complete list of surviving ex-votos see Attilio Caroli and Gianfranco Ciprini. 1993. *Gli Ex Voto di S. Maria della Quercia*, Cassa di Risparmio della Provincia di Viterbo.

branches.¹⁸⁹ It demonstrates a symbiosis of materials: clay and wood—image and relic. The tree, having sheltered the image of the Madonna, itself became part of the miraculous image complex. By embracing the image, the tree attested to its miraculous nature, thus becoming a contact relic. The placement of the image in the tree also physically underscored the Madonna’s connection to a particular place. In this way the image was rooted in a particular location, claiming that space as sacred.¹⁹⁰

It became increasingly common during the early modern period both in Italy as well as across Western Europe for tree cults connected to the Virgin Mary to appear spontaneously, either as an apparition of the Virgin in a tree, or by an image of her being placed in a tree—as with the Madonna dei Bagni. These occurrences happened primarily to communities outside urban centers. There are many descriptions of a miraculous image in a tree being moved to a church in an urban center, and it autonomously moving back to the tree and the community in which it originally appeared. In this way, the Virgin Mary “chose” to be with a particular community.¹⁹¹ The agency of the Virgin’s image demonstrated her connection with a

¹⁸⁹ Guaitini, Grazietta and Tullio Seppilli. 1983. “L’irruzione del negativo e l’intervento del soprannaturale nello spazio e nel tempo quotidiano: la fondazione del culto e il corpus di ex-voto in maiolica della Madonna dei Bagni” in *Gli Ex-voto in maiolica della Chiesa della Madonna dei Bagni a Casalina presso Deruta*. 1. ed. Firenze: Nuova Guaraldi, 14. This source is quoting the Anonymous author of the manuscript entitled *Historia della Madonna del Bagno de’ Padri Casinensi di Perugia scopertasi l’anno MDCLVII. Composta da Persona assi beneficata, e tenuta a questa Regina Celeste*, housed in the Archivio di San Pietro in Perugia, mazzo XXVI/1 cc. 1r-36v. Cit., cc. 9v-10r.

¹⁹⁰ See Christian, William A. 1981. *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 70–125.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, 75.

particular landscape and its people. In many cases of tree cults like the Madonna dei Bagni and the Madonna della Quercia, Church authorities, once they accepted the legitimacy of the original location, promoted them through prints depicting the Madonna and Child in the branches of the tree. Why include the iconography of a tree in a cult's promotional imagery?

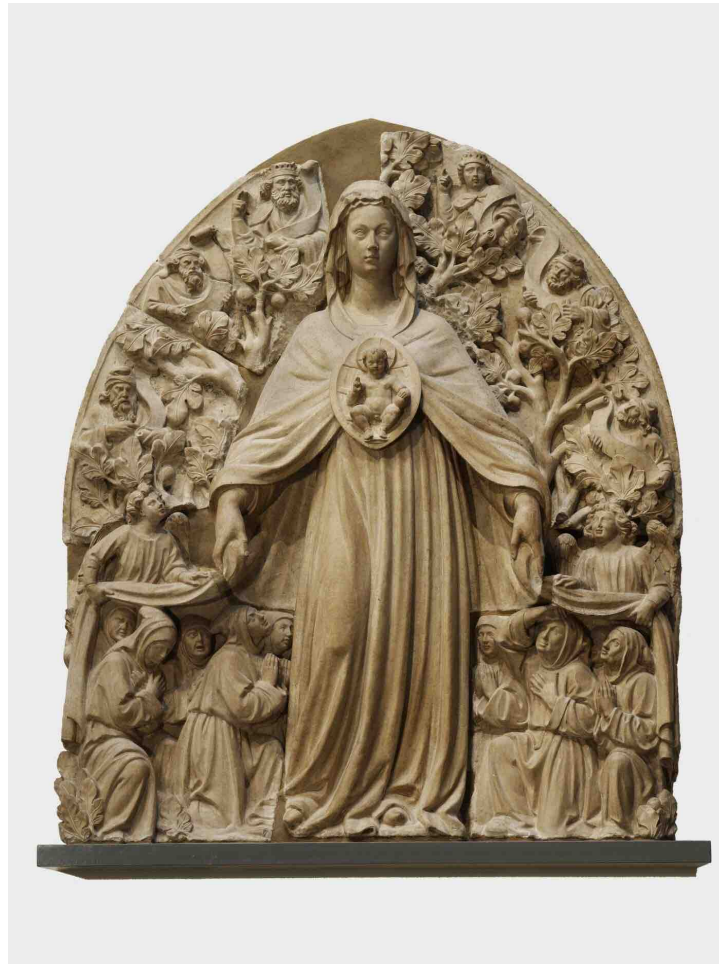


Fig. 3.2. Bartolomeo Buon, *Madonna della Misericordia with the Tree of Jesse*. Stone relief with traces of paint, c.1445-50. Originally located above the portal of the Scuola Vecchia della Misericordia, Venice. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK. Image in the public domain. Photo credit: <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O92842/virgin-and-child-with-kneeling-relief-buon-bartolomeo/>

The tree, like clay, has various biblical precedents which make it an appropriate part of the cult imagery. For one, a depiction of the Virgin Mary in a tree with the Christ Child calls to mind the Tree of Jesse, a representation of the family lineage of Christ.¹⁹² The imagery originates from the Old Testament passage of Isaiah 11:1 which states that out of the root of Jesse a flower would bloom—interpreted as the family tree of Christ. An example of this type of imagery is the relief sculpture originally placed on the portal of the Scuola Vecchia della Misericordia in Venice (fig. 3.2). It dates to approximately 1448 and was made by Venetian sculptor Bartolomeo Buon depicting a version of the Madonna della Misericordia, or Madonna of Mercy, with her mantle covering the faithful in a protective gesture. The Christ Child fastens the mantle at her chest, emphasizing her role as Christ-bearer and Mother of God. What is particularly special about this Madonna of Mercy is the depiction of the tree behind her. Emerging from the tree, prophets hold scrolls prophesying the coming of Christ—clearly identifying the tree as the Tree of Jesse. In this sculpture the Virgin Mary herself acts as an actual tree—connecting the blooming Christ child at her chest to his familial roots.¹⁹³ Her arms outstretch as protective branches, foreshadowing the cruciform gesture of Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross—another tree.¹⁹⁴ This is an example of the sheltering quality of trees that rural

¹⁹² See Susan L. Green. 2019. *Tree of Jesse Iconography in Northern Europe in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*. New York; Routledge.

¹⁹³ Brown, Katherine T. 2017. *Mary of Mercy in Medieval and Renaissance Italian Art: Devotional Image and Civic Emblem*. London; Routledge, 43-45.

¹⁹⁴ Dufour-Kowalska, Gabrielle. 1985. *L’arbre de vie et la croix: essai sur l’imagination visionnaire*. Genève: Editions du Tricorne.

communities in particular were very aware of and in need of, even more than urban communities. The Tree of Jesse is one aspect of the Madonna's tree iconography, there are, however, many more possible readings of this type of image.



Fig. 3.3. Salzburg Missal. Image in the public domain. United States Library of Congress. Photo credit: https://www.loc.gov/resource/gdcwdl.wdl_08948_003/?sp=127

Another way to theologially understand the pairing of Mary and the tree is by looking at representations of Mary as the new Eve—a biblical figure who is also prominently connected to a tree.¹⁹⁵ To illustrate this concept, I turn to an image by

¹⁹⁵ Mary as the new Eve is a theological concept with a long history. Authors such as the Second-Century Apologists, Ephrem the Syrian (ca. 306-373), Caelius Sedulius (d. ca. 440-450), the Venerable Bede (d.735), and Peter Damian (d. 1072) were among the first to elaborate on this concept. See Luigi

Berthold Furtmeyr—*The Tree of Death and Life* (1478-89) made for the Salzburg Missal (fig. 3.3).¹⁹⁶ A tree grows in the center of the image flanked by two women: the one on the left fully clothed and the one on the right completely naked. They are the Virgin Mary and Eve, respectively. In this image, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Tree of Life have merged into one tree.¹⁹⁷ The serpent winds around the trunk, handing the fruit to Eve, which she feeds to a group of people behind her, amongst which Death personified as a dark skeleton emerges. A skull sits among the branches on her side of the tree, driving home the theme of death. While Eve selects death, which she serves to humanity, on the other side of the tree the Virgin Mary picks eucharistic wafers that she feeds to the people behind her. Among this group an angel appears with a banner reading “*Ecce panis angelorum factus cibus viatorum*” (Behold the bread of angels made food for pilgrims). Among the branches on this side of the tree is the miniature image of the crucified Christ. Mary as provider of the eucharist through her role in the incarnation is clear. The meaning of the juxtaposition of the two women is apparent: while Eve fed humanity with death from a tree (the Biblical Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil), Mary fed humanity with eternal life from a tree (the Cross). Additionally, in many representations of the Crucifixion Adam’s skull lies beneath the cross as a reminder of the original sin and necessity for

Gambero. 1999. *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*. 1st ed. San Francisco: Ignatius Press; and Luigi Gambero. 2005. *Mary in the Middle Ages: The Blessed Virgin Mary in the Thought of Medieval Latin Theologians*. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press.

¹⁹⁶ Furtmeyr, Berthold, Flourished Artist. *The Salzburg Missal*. [Place of Publication Not Identified: Publisher Not Identified, to 1499, 1400] Pdf. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2021667776/>.

¹⁹⁷ For a description of these trees in the Garden of Eden see Genesis 2-3.

Christ's sacrifice.¹⁹⁸ In the Salzburg Missal image, the intact body of Adam lies near the roots of the tree—alluding to the Cross as the Tree of Life—the Cross indeed appears in the branches above him.



Fig. 3.4. Girolamo dai Libri, *Madonna and Child with Saints*, tempera and oil on canvas, circa 1520. Metropolitan Museum of New York. Image in the public domain. Photo credit: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/436518>

¹⁹⁸ According to tradition, the Crucifixion happened at the location of Adam's burial. See Origen, and Ronald E. Heine. 2018. *The Commentary of Origen on the Gospel of St Matthew*. First edition. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press. See also Wilson, Charles William. 1906. *Golgotha and the Holy Sepulchre*. Edited by Colonel Sir C. M. Watson. England: The Committee of the Palestine Exploration Fund, 2-3.

The pairing of a growing tree alongside the Virgin Mary, particularly coupled with her holding the Christ Child, could also be interpreted as an allusion to the cross which would eventually be made from a living tree. An example of such a compositional device can be found in the painting by the Veronese artist Girolamo dai Libri from around 1520 (fig. 3.4). This painting depicts a Madonna and Child seated in a landscape surrounded by various saints and angels. Directly behind them are two trees—one living and one dead. This symbolism can be interpreted as an allusion to the future sacrifice of Christ—an idea further supported by the inclusion of a peacock (a symbol of immortality) perched in the dead tree's branches. The importance of the tree's symbolism is enhanced by the amount of space it takes up in the composition—the living tree fills nearly half the canvas. The verdant and withered trees could also harken back to the Trees of Life and Knowledge of Good and Evil from the Garden of Eden, emphasizing the Virgin Mary's role as the New Eve and connecting the cross with the Tree of Life.¹⁹⁹

The theological symbolism of trees was familiar to all Christians regardless of their location. But in rural communities that are more closely related to and

¹⁹⁹ The Tree of Life was and is a concept that stretches beyond the Judeo-Christian belief system. More broadly, the tree emerged as a sacred symbol that predated Christianity in various ancient cultures and was often connected to ancient temples and religious beliefs, as attested by a wide range of textual and visual evidence. Examples include Athena's sacred olive tree on the Acropolis, said to have been planted by Athena herself and, the holy tree at the oracle at Dodona in ancient Greece. Ancient examples in Italy include the sacred grove near the Roman Forum and another at Ariccia outside Rome. Since the tree is a prominent and symbolically generative part of the natural world, it could be used as a tool for understanding the universe. As such, Carole Cusak relates that it was thought of as an *axis mundi*—a hub or axis of the universe (like the cross), and an *imago mundi*—a representation of the world (roots reaching down into the underworld and branches into the heavens). Cusak, Carole M. 2011. *The Sacred Tree: Ancient and Medieval Manifestations*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, xiv-xv.

depending on agriculture and the natural environment, the sacredness of trees has other dimensions beyond the theological. Trees are often used as landmarks and boundary markers and they might be related to the life of the community well before they house an image. For example, some trees can be used as gathering points, shelters, and so on.²⁰⁰

Another way people might have related to the tree is through its role in Christian space-claiming. One of the first examples of such an act is the legend of the Glastonbury Thorn in England. Allegedly the staff of Joseph of Arimathea was taken to England and thrust into the ground where it grew into a tree known as the Glastonbury Thorn.²⁰¹ This act was a clear creation of sacred space in Europe. This type of space-claiming was echoed by the appearance of Madonna tree cults in the early modern period. The image of the Virgin in a tree demonstrated her connection with a particular landscape and people, while still being rooted in a theologically sound image. Visualizing Mary in the tree would have been compelling to those viewers who possessed a basic understanding of trees and their varied significance in Christian iconography.

The Virgin Mary created sacred space on the Italian peninsula in the early modern period through relics and images rooted in theological concepts. When an image of the Madonna and Child was placed in a tree, another layer of meaning was added to the image while simultaneously tying it to a particular place and community

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 171.

²⁰¹ Ibid, xi.

in an act of space-claiming. How did elements of display help enhance and bolster the feeling of the sacred in the claimed space? In the following section I turn now to the case of the Madonna dei Bagni to explore this idea.

Display and Replication of the Cult Image at the Madonna dei Bagni

In order to understand implications of display in the Madonna dei Bagni, the original function of the cult image of the Madonna dei Bagni at the main altar of the sanctuary is important to address (fig. 3.1). The Madonna and Child are painted on a maiolica cup—a vessel used for drinking. This fact directly relates to the concept of Mary as a vessel and her role in the incarnation of Christ—she was a container for God to be made flesh.²⁰² The type of object on which the image was painted therefore bolsters theological concepts. These ideas are reiterated in the decoration of the Madonna dei Bagni church structure as five verses from scripture are quoted in Latin at four corners of the base of the cupola: two reference trees, and three reference vessels.²⁰³

²⁰² Evangelatou, Maria. 2019. “Krater of Nectar and Altar of the Bread of Life: The Theotokos as Provider of the Eucharist in Byzantine Culture.” In *The Reception of the Virgin in Byzantium*, 77–119. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108696791.005>.

²⁰³ *Requiescite sub arbore et confortetur cor vestrum, postea transibitis* (Gen.18:4-5); *beatus uir qui sub ramis eius morabitur protegetur sub tegmine illius a feruore* (Eccles. 14:26-27); *vas admirabile opus excelsi* (Eccles. 43:2) *coronauit eum in vasis virtutis* (Eccl. 45:9); *vasa avri excelsa et eminentia non commemorabuntur in comparatione illius* (Job 28:17-18). I quote the shortened versions of these verses in Latin above as they appear on the walls of the church. Below are the English translations: “Rest yourselves under the tree: and comfort ye your hearts; after that ye shall pass on.” (Gen.18:4-5); “He shall set his children under her shelter, and shall lodge under her branches. By her he shall be covered from heat, and in her glory shall he dwell.” (Eccles. 14:26-27); “An admirable vessel of exalted work.” (Eccles. 43:2); “Crown him with vessels of virtue.” (Eccl. 45:9); “The vessels of the Father are high and prominent, they will not be mentioned in comparison with them.” (Job 28:17-18).

The importance of the materiality of the cult image must also be noted. The image is made of clay and pigments—materials that were considered humble but also accessible and familiar to the local population of devotees, as outlined in Chapter 2. The humility of these materials also acted as a kind of defense to accusations of idolatrous worship, which would have been more connected to images made of fine materials like gold or silver. Furthermore, these materials were particularly appealing to the local community of maiolica-makers. This image, made from the material from which the community made their livelihoods is significant, rich in complex meanings.

The humble material of broken maiolica is contrasted with its enshrinement in a golden frame between the tree's branches. This frame periodically is changed—there are at least three which have been used in recent years and, although stylistically they differ (from baroque to minimalist), they all form the same basic shape, radiating outward from the central image in a circular sunburst design. Made in gold, sometimes encrusted with jewels, the frame always in contrast to material of the cult image. If the image of the Madonna and Child is painted on humble clay, these frames, through their material richness, indicate the spiritual wealth of the image. The frame functions much like a reliquary, but perhaps more compellingly, its form may also be compared to that of monstrances containing the host (fig. 3.5). Similar to the eucharist in shape and size, the miraculous image of the Madonna dei Bagni is likewise displayed above the main altar of the church where the host would be during mass (fig. 3.6). The appearance of this particular miraculous image therefore calls to mind Christ's incarnation as well as the transubstantiation, which indeed would occur

within the same space in which the image is displayed. This image that is similar in size, shape, and display to the eucharistic wafer also highlights the concept of salvation through both the rituals of the Church and its images.



Fig. 3.5. Attributed to Diego de Atienza, Monstrance. Spanish. 1646-9. Image in the public domain. Photo credit: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/197090>



Fig. 3.6. Framed cult image of the Madonna and Child in the church of the Madonna dei Bagni, Deruta, Italy. 2023.

Along with the cult image, the tree is also enshrined at the main altar, encased behind glass in an ornate gilt wood baroque niche (fig. 3.7). The tree appears above the main altar, much like the common placement of crucifixes above the altar in Catholic churches. In those cases, the adult Christ hangs on the cross. In the case of the Madonna dei Bagni, the image of Christ and his mother appear in the tree. The tree in the Madonna dei Bagni may be read as an allusion to Christ's future passion on the cross. On either side of the tree are two columns and a pilaster supporting an ornate capital. These columns with florid Corinthian capitals create the impression of other trees surrounding the relic-tree, evoking the original forest. Above the tree is a framed painting on canvas depicting the Eternal Father who looks down on the image of the Madonna and Child in a gesture of blessing. In between this painting and the tree is the Latin inscription *EGO MATER SANCTAE SPEI*, "I am the Mother of holy hope." This bright gold niche appears in stark contrast to the white walls covered in maiolica tiles which surround it. Gold only appears in one other place in the church structure: behind the main altar. There is a passageway behind the altar which leads to a small gold window at the bottom of the backside of the tree (fig. 3.8). The window not only allows visitors to see the tree up close, but it also holds something very precious to the cult: the first maiolica ex-voto. A small altar is set up under this window, usually decorated with flowers and prayer cards. The passageway functions much like areas in other churches where relics are viewed at the main altar of a church.



Fig. 3.7. Main altar of the Madonna dei Bagni.



Fig. 3.8. The backside of the main altar with a window framing the bottom of the tree and first ex-voto, Madonna dei Bagni.

The ex-voto tile depicting the first miracle carefully copies the cult image located on the opposite side of the tree utilizing both the same colors and same medium of maiolica. However, there is one noticeable difference: the inclusion of the crescent moon below the Madonna and Child. The crescent moon in combination with the Madonna may invoke the vision of the apocalyptic woman from Revelation, later to be interpreted as the image of the Immaculate Conception. The concept of the Immaculate Conception refers to Mary's conception as she was born without sin and was therefore able to give birth to a sinless Christ.²⁰⁴ It is unclear if the cult image originally contained the crescent moon—if it did, the fragment containing the moon is now lost. However, it is apparent that since the beginning of the cult the people worshipping at the shrine understood it to be an important part of her iconography as nearly all ex-votos of the Virgin and Child in the tree at the Madonna dei Bagni depict the crescent moon, something that continues even today.²⁰⁵

The way that the artists who created these tiles have depicted the Madonna dei Bagni over the years has not always been consistent. Overall, there are two main depictions of the image: one which replicates the original image at the altar and another which replicates the official printed image of the cult. The printed image was

²⁰⁴ Boss, Sarah Jane. 2007. "The Development of the Doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception" in *Mary the Complete Resource*. London; Continuum, 207-235.

²⁰⁵ The depiction of the Virgin Mary as the Immaculate Conception grew in popularity following the Counter-Reformation. See Levi D'Ancona, Mirella. 1957. *The Iconography of the Immaculate Conception in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance*. New York (State): Published by the College Art Association of America in conjunction with the Art Bulletin; and Mâle, Emile. 1932. *L'art religieux après le Concile de Trente, étude sur l'iconographie de la fin du XVIe siècle, du XVIIe, du XVIIIe siècle, Italie--France--Espagne--Flanders*. Paris: A. Colin.

created by Church authorities to promote the Madonna del Bagno cult; a surviving copy is bound with the original manuscript detailing the history of the origin of the cult written by an anonymous author (fig. 3.9). Basic iconographic elements remain the same: the Madonna and Child are set within a circular form between the branches of a tree. However, stylistically, the Church's printed image deviates from the ceramic prototype. The maiolica Madonna is painted with swift and decisive brushstrokes giving a more stylized quality to the image, while the print has been created in a more naturalistic style, highlighting details that are not present in the original such as soft clouds surrounding the Madonna and Child. The print also does not include the crescent moon. More context is also added to the print, placing the cult image in a carefully shaded tree with a cityscape of Deruta in the background—linking the holy image to a particular locale. This version of the Madonna dei Bagni appears on tiles more frequently beginning in the eighteenth century, likely because this was the image devotees would have in their homes as prints.



Fig. 3.9. Print of the Madonna del Bagno, XXVI/1, c. IIv. “*Effigie della miracolosa Madonna del Bagno de’ Padri Casinensi di Perugia vicino Casalina scopertasi l’anno 1657*”, engraving by Antonio Floridi da Fotogno; 256 x 163 mm. Bound after the frontispiece of the manuscript by the Anonymous author. Photo credit: Ugolino Nicolini, “La Madonna dei Bagni: il culto e la documentazione” in *Ex Voto: Arte e Fede nel santuario della Madonna del Bagno in Casalina*, Effe Fabrizio Fabbri Ed: Perugia, 70.



Fig. 3.10. Carmen Monotti. Madonna and Child tondo. 2010s.

The sacred space of the Madonna dei Bagni radiates outward from the main altar through repetition of the cult image. This is achieved not only through the ex-votos which line the walls surrounding it, but also through the recreation of a larger version of the cult image displayed in the church sanctuary. Because the tiny maiolica image of the Madonna and Child between the branches of the tree only measures a couple of inches across, it is very difficult to see it from church seating. For this reason, Carmen Monotti was commissioned (sometime between 2015 and 2018) to create a large maiolica tondo a couple of feet in diameter representing the Madonna dei Bagni (fig. 3.10). This image is not a direct copy of the prototype but appears more along the lines of the official printed image. The Madonna and Child are depicted in front of a yellow background with oak branches on either side of them. The crescent moon is not included in this version. This enlarged copy is displayed on the left-hand side of the altar, making the image of the Madonna and Child more visible to devotees and visitors. What is more important here is not a faithful recreation of the miraculous image, but rather, the idea of what is represented. This copy extends the influence of the prototype at the main altar into the sanctuary of the church.²⁰⁶ Likewise, prayer cards printed with the official Church image of the Madonna del Bagno are available within the church for devoted to pick up and take home (fig. 3.11). Through prints, the cult image is incorporated into the daily life of

²⁰⁶ For a discussion of the extension of a holy image via copies see Garnett, Jane, and Gervase Rosser. 2013. *Spectacular Miracles: Transforming Images in Italy from the Renaissance to the Present*. London: Reaktion Books.

worshippers—extending the sacred landscape of the Madonna dei Bagni into the homes of her devotees.

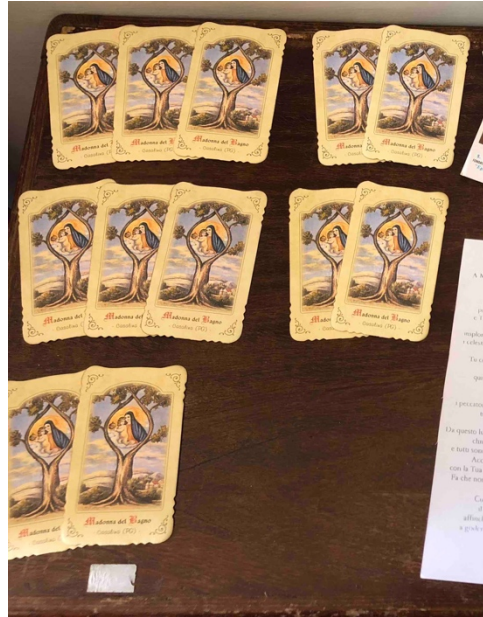


Fig. 3.11. Prayer cards on display at the Madonna dei Bagni.

Although there are two main versions of the cult image represented on the tiles, the Madonna appears in an individualized way on each of them—sometimes in the clouds, sometimes on an altar, other times as a Madonna della Misericordia—these differences highlight the fact that she appears in personal ways to everyone. An exact copy of the cult image is obviously not the primary goal. Instead, individualized Madonnas demonstrate the far-reaching influence of the cult on the community by depicting her in diverse homes and landscapes across time. They show the presence of the Madonna dei Bagni not only in Deruta and the surrounding area, but in faraway places such as Bosnia, Prague and even the United States (fig. 3.12, 3.13 and 3.14).



Fig. 3.12. Ex-voto depicting an event in Bosnia. Photo credit: *Ex Voto: Arte e Fede nel santuario della Madonna del Bagno in Casalina*, Effe Fabrizio Fabbri Ed: Perugia.



Fig. 3.13. Ex-voto depicting an event in Prague. Photo credit: *Ex Voto: Arte e Fede nel santuario della Madonna del Bagno in Casalina*, Effe Fabrizio Fabbri Ed: Perugia.



Fig. 3.14. Ex-voto depicting an event in New York. Photo credit: *Ex Voto: Arte e Fede nel santuario della Madonna del Bagno in Casalina*, Effe Fabrizio Fabbri Ed: Perugia.

Through replication, the cult image of the Madonna dei Bagni creates sacred space beyond the church structure. In “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin claims that the aura of a work of art withered in the age of mechanical reproduction.²⁰⁷ However, he also observes: “By making many reproductions it [the mechanical process] substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced.”²⁰⁸ Along these lines I would argue that in the case of the Madonna dei Bagni in the age of mechanical reproduction, the aura of the cult image is not just intact but also enhanced through replication. Reproduction of the cult image occurs not only in print media such as prayer cards, but also on the ex-voto tiles which give additional life to the prototype. The ex-votos are not like prints or photographs, depicting the cult image as replicated facsimiles, but are individualized versions of the Madonna and Child as maiolica painted ceramic. The ex-votos encapsulate the essence of the aura as they were/are made for and are contained in a religious ritual space. They repeat the cult image of the Madonna and Child between the branches of the oak tree in the hundreds, but no two images are completely identical—each is represented in a unique way reflecting

²⁰⁷ This essay is also entitled *Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility*.

²⁰⁸ Benjamin, Walter. 2010. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. United States: Prism Key Press.

the personal relationships each person has with Mary. Hence, they are best thought of as translations of the cult image, rather than copies.²⁰⁹

Conclusion

This chapter has followed the thread of materiality into a discussion of the miracle-working cult image of the Virgin Mary in relation to the creation of sacred space. In order to better understand the cult image at the Madonna dei Bagni, a history of the creation of sacred space in Italy in relation to the Virgin Mary was explored, looking at both relics and images of the mother of God. A discussion of tree-Madonnas expanded theological concepts as well as ideas of the creation of sacred space. The case study of the Madonna dei Bagni explored how sacred space was created in relation to the cult image both within and beyond the church structure. However, a discussion of the creation of sacred space cannot be limited only to the cult image but must also include an analysis of elements surrounding it, such as votive offerings and performative actions. Since the origin of the cult, ex-votos have been brought to the space of the Madonna dei Bagni, originally hung on the tree to mark it as sacred. As the space gained recognition from the community and Church authorities, a structure was developed around the tree and the ex-votos were memorialized in durable maiolica to permanently mark the space. To further unpack the creation of sacred

²⁰⁹ For a detailed discussion about translations of cult images see Jane Garnett and Gervase Rosser. 2013. *Spectacular Miracles: Transforming Images in Italy from the Renaissance to the Present*. London: Reaktion Books, 218.

space at the Madonna dei Bagni, the following chapter will address the concepts of hierotopy/hierochronotopy and the display of ex-votos within the church space.

Chapter 4

The Creation and Preservation of a Timeful Sacred Space in the Madonna dei Bagni

Introduction

The Madonna dei Bagni does not exist as a sacred space in isolation but is part of a greater sacred landscape within the region of Umbria. Since the Middle Ages, this area has been filled with sacred sites connected to the lives of local saints including Saints Francis (c.1181–1226) and Clare (1194–1253) of Assisi, Saint Benedict of Norcia (480–547) and Saint Rita of Cascia (1381–1457).²¹⁰ Saints further afield such as Bernardino (1380–1444) and Catherine of Siena (1347–1380) also influenced the sacred landscape surrounding Deruta.²¹¹ The Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi is perhaps the best-known sacred space of the region and one of the most popular pilgrimage sites in Italy. The structure is built at the final resting place of Francis in the lower basilica. The interior is covered in medieval and early Renaissance frescoes painted by the great artists of the time including Cimabue, Pietro Lorenzetti, Simone

²¹⁰ See Marion A. Habig and John R. H. Moorman. 1973. *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies; English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*. 3rd rev ed. Edited by John R.H. Moorman. Chicago, Ill: Franciscan Herald Press; Nirit Ben-Aryeh Debby. 2014. *The Cult of St Clare of Assisi in Early Modern Italy*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company; Cuthbert Butler. 1962. *Benedictine Monachism; Studies in Benedictine Life and Rule*. Cambridge, England: Speculum Historiale; and Agostino Trapè and John E. Rotelle. 1989. *The Message of Saint Rita of Cascia*. Villanova, PA: Augustinian Press.

²¹¹ See Cynthia Polecristi. 2000. *Preaching Peace in Renaissance Italy: Bernardino of Siena & His Audience*. Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press; and Giuliana Cavallini. 1998. *Catherine of Siena*. London; Geoffrey Chapman.

Martini, and most famously Giotto.²¹² Giotto's frescoes in the upper basilica memorialize the life of the saint and his miracles in a didactic plan. Today this space is still revered in silence. The interior of the basilica contains not just the saint's body but also the memories of his life and miracles painted on the walls. Faith in these miracles continues today as pilgrims journey to Saint Francis's tomb to tuck their hopes and prayers, written on folded-up bits of paper, between the stones of his sepulcher. The sacred space of the saint's tomb expands out to include the lower and upper basilicas and also the landscape of the surrounding area of Umbria in which miracles were performed by the saint during (and after) his life, and where today pilgrims amble along well-trodden paths following the life of the saint.²¹³

Given the expansive ways the sacred space at Assisi is not only contained at the threshold of the saint's tomb but exists as a network of places and things activated by the experiences of the devoted, we can recognize it as a clear example Lidov's concept of hierotopy.²¹⁴ The term stems from the Greek adjective *hieros/-a/-on*, meaning sacred, and the noun *topos* meaning space. Rather than just meaning sacred space, hierotopy is formally defined as a special form of art involving the

²¹² See Elvio Lunghi. 1996. *The Basilica of St Francis at Assisi: the Frescoes by Giotto, His Precursors and Followers*. London: Thames and Hudson.

²¹³ Tschen-Emmons, James. 2016. "Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi: Assisi, Italy Begun 1228, Formally Consecrated 1253." In *Buildings And Landmarks Of Medieval Europe*, 189–96. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9798400622205.0041>.

²¹⁴ Lidov, Alekseï. 2006. *Hierotopy: the creation of sacred spaces in Byzantium and medieval Russia*. Moscow: Indrik.

performative creation of spatial icons.²¹⁵ A spatial icon includes a kind of sacred ambiance which is created through the interaction of the various parts of a sacred space and the activities occurring in it. For example, a miracle-working image (or icon) must be considered in relation to relics, the liturgy, lighting, scents, and performative actions taking place around it, both by the clergy and the faithful. Like the Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi, this concept is easily applied to the church of the Madonna dei Bagni. A discussion of the miraculous image, which was addressed in Chapter 3, cannot be complete without a broader understanding of the sacred complex surrounding it.

While Lidov expanded the study of sacred space, introducing the term hierotopy; Maria Evangelatou complements this work with her concept of hierochronotopy: sacred-time-space.²¹⁶ The concept of hierochronotopy is defined by Evangelatou as “the essential integration of temporal and spatial dimensions in human approaches to the sacred (which includes but is not limited to the divine).”²¹⁷ In order to understand hierochronotopy, one must keep in mind that human beings experience the world in spatio-temporal terms and maintain connections to both those dimensions in religious practices. In an example of this concept, Evangelatou

²¹⁵ Simsky, Andrew. 2020. “The Discovery of Hierotopy.” *Визуальная теология*, no. 1: 9–28. <https://doi.org/10.34680/vistheo-2020-1-9-28>, 9.

²¹⁶ Evangelatou, Maria. 2021. “Hierochronotopy: Stepping into timeful space through Bonnano’s twelfth-century door for the Pisa cathedral” in *Icons of Space: Advances in Hierotopy*. Edited by Jelena Bogdanović. London; Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 134-172.

²¹⁷ *Ibid*, 136.

explores how Bonnano's door for the Pisa cathedral and elements of the church's interior evoke different moments and places in sacred history that were also integrated in church rituals and were meant to highlight the wisdom of the divine plan for human salvation and reassure the faithful of their place in God's kingdom.

Her work informs my study of the Madonna dei Bagni as I also reference not just a sacred space in central Italy, but one with imagery that relates closely with that discussed by Evangelatou, in particular, the Virgin Mary and sacred trees. As noted in the introductory chapter, Evangelatou utilizes the term timefulness, which was introduced by Rose to describe the ways "the past, present, and future coexisted in particular moments," especially during performance of ritual.²¹⁸ I likewise reference Rose's use of the term timefulness and timeful spaces in relation to sacred time depicted and created at the church of the Madonna dei Bagni. In Christianity, past, present and future coexist in the conceptualization of God as eternal, or timeful.²¹⁹ In this chapter I consider the Madonna dei Bagni as a case study in hierochronotopy, as a shrine that exists not just at isolated moments along a linear timeline, but as a timeful space in which past, present, and future co-exist.

This chapter will consider the ways sacred space is activated at the church of the Madonna dei Bagni. In so doing, I will examine the modes of ex-voto display

²¹⁸ Rose, Diana. 2017. "Living Time, Performing Memory: Maya Ceremonies of Foundation and Renewal", PhD Dissertation in Visual Studies at the UC Santa Cruz, viii.

²¹⁹ Evangelatou, Maria. 2021. "Hierochronotopy: Stepping into timeful space through Bonnano's twelfth-century door for the Pisa cathedral" in *Icons of Space: Advances in Hierotopy*. Edited by Jelena Bogdanović. London; Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 166.

within the church, and explore how memory connects to the creation of sacred space. I will argue that the sacred space of the Madonna dei Bagni was and is created not only through the cult image at the main altar placed between the branches of a tree, but also through continuous participation by the community, including the practice of memorializing maiolica ex-votos onto the church body. I will analyze the display in the sanctuary of the Madonna dei Bagni, arguing that memory embedded in these images is a central component to the creation of this space as sacred. I will then go on to consider notions of time in relation to the church complex, exploring ways in which the cult image, tree, and surrounding ex-votos not only create sacred space, but articulate an expansive understanding of sacred time. To conclude, I will address how the timeful space of the Madonna dei Bagni has been uniquely maintained and reinforced in recent years following an act of destruction.



Fig. 4.1. Main entrance to the church of the Madonna dei Bagni.

Pilgrimage as an activation of sacred space

It can be argued that sacred space is activated by visitors to the Madonna dei Bagni. The architecture of the church invites—even encourages—a particular type of reverential movement. From the arrival of the visitor, the delineated trajectory marks out a space of devotion. Today, a pilgrim to the Madonna dei Bagni arrives off the E45 highway, guided by signs to the bottom of a hill (fig. 4.1). A cypress-lined staircase leads up to the sanctuary. This movement upwards along the staircase could

call to mind the *scala sancta* (the staircase believed to have been walked by Christ during his Passion, later transferred from the Holy Land to Rome), which leads to the *Sancta Sanctorum* at the Lateran.²²⁰ With this in mind, it would encourage pilgrims and visitors to focus on the suffering of Christ, and indeed their own correlated physical movements which guide them to adopt an attitude of reverence for the place.

Perhaps more compellingly, the staircase connects with the concept of Jacob's Ladder, and represents a symbolic ascent into heaven via this typological representation of the Virgin Mary.²²¹ These types of pilgrimages upward toward a holy place are ancient Biblical concepts which can be linked to pilgrimage destinations such as Mount Sinai, the ascent of the mountain itself being an archetypal pilgrimage journey which, like the Madonna dei Bagni, is related to the Virgin Mary and a plant (the burning bush).²²²

²²⁰ See Ewart Witcombe, C. L. C. 1985. "Sixtus V and the Scala Santa." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 44 (4): 368–79. <https://doi.org/10.2307/990114>.

²²¹ See Genesis 28:10–19

²²² Elsner, John. 1994. "The Viewer and the Vision: The Case of the Sinai Apse." *Art History* 17 (1): 81–102. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8365.1994.tb00563.x>.



Fig. 4.2. Main altar of the Madonna dei Bagni.

With all this in mind, the stairs at the Madonna dei Bagni invite visitors to adopt an attitude of contemplation and reverence as they move upward, as if moving closer to heaven. If the pilgrim arrives on a day of celebration, the main doors will have been flung open, inviting them inside.²²³ While brick makes up the building blocks of the exterior, beyond the threshold, the interior is built up with rectangular maiolica ex-voto tiles. Upon entering the structure, the pilgrim is surrounded with hundreds of tiles, floor to ceiling. They radiate outward from the golden altar where

²²³ A visitor on any other day would find these main doors locked and would enter the church via a door on the right-hand side of the building. The side door places the visitor inside the church in a maiolica ex-voto-covered passageway behind the main altar. The ex-votos date from the seventeenth century to present-day. Down this passage on the left is a gold-framed window encasing both the bottom part of the tree at the main altar as well as the first maiolica ex-voto of the cult. At the end of the passage the visitor turns left to enter the main sanctuary. What initially seemed like dozens of tiles suddenly become hundreds of tiles surrounding the viewer.

the tiny image of the Madonna and Child rests with the oak tree (fig. 4.2). While the miraculous image of the Madonna and Child lacks in size, the ex-votos compensate by narrating her history on every wall and pillar of the church. Maiolica holy water fonts decorated with angels beckon the faithful to anoint and cross themselves upon their arrival. Wooden chairs and benches invite weary travelers to rest their tired legs in the company of the Madonna. Visitors are invited to move around the space, pulled from one story to another, as if through the pages of a book (fig. 4.3). The ex-votos move the viewer around the pillars, along the walls, and behind the main altar, where a passageway takes the visitor to the framed original ex-voto displayed at the roots of the tree. The interior decoration of the Madonna dei Bagni functions like the body of an elder, sharing the community's most precious memories from generations past and present.



Fig. 4.3. Interior of the Madonna dei Bagni.

Since the inception of the cult in the late seventeenth century, pilgrimages have been made to the Madonna dei Bagni by a multitude of devotees, as attested by the continuous dedication of ex-votos. This tradition continues with organized annual pilgrimage processions today from local towns, including the following: Casalina (on Easter day), Ripabianca (Easter Monday), Papiano (Easter Tuesday morning) and Deruta (Easter Tuesday afternoon).²²⁴ Roman Catholic pilgrimage is more than just going to a particular place; it is a sacred journey in which the devotees leave their homes and travel to the limen or threshold of the divine and holy.²²⁵ In the Catholic tradition, the pilgrimage destination is a location where the presence of God and his saints on earth are made manifest through a particular object, whether that be a relic or miracle-working icon. This is the space in which miracles can and have occurred; in the case of the Madonna dei Bagni, the miraculous is evidenced by the ex-votos lining the walls of the church, proclaiming the spiritual power of the place. Prayers are said and rituals are performed in this space (such as taking mass, leaving an ex-voto or flower, and lighting a candle). Having interfaced with the divine in this sacred

²²⁴ In the past, every year, two weeks after Easter, the people who lived around Civitella dei Conti (nearly fifteen kilometers away) used to make a ritual procession to the church of the Madonna dei Bagni. In the 1920s the tradition stopped due to severe weather which made the distance prohibitive. The years that followed were very unfortunate for the population as hail destroyed their crops, so in 1936 they made a compromise by instead going to a nearer chapel, which they dedicated to the Madonna dei Bagni. Inside the chapel, the altar is decorated with part of a tree and a ceramic plate with the image of a Madonna and Child placed between the branches. The people of Civitella dei Conti continue to make the procession to this chapel two weeks after Easter every year; see, Antonio Santantoni Menichelli. 2007. *La Madonna del Bagno: La Chiesa- L'Historia*. Spello (PG): Dimensione Grafica, 90.

²²⁵ See Victor W. Turner and Edith L. B. Turner. 1978. *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*. New York: Columbia University Press.

locale, pilgrims return home. Each individual journey in itself intensifies the spiritual significance of the place and amplifies its credibility as the devoted return home to profess their interaction. In this way, the sacred space of the Madonna dei Bagni is not contained only within the church structure, but expands outward, into the communities surrounding it and even into far away communities to which many of the pilgrims or their relatives belong.

Display of the Ex-votos

Now that we have established that sacred space extends outward from the church through the rituals performed by local communities as well as the experiences and story-telling of individual pilgrims, let us turn to the interior of the church of the Madonna dei Bagni to explore how sacred space is conveyed through display. Inside the church, the ex-voto images line the walls ranging from one to two feet off the ground to several feet up until the rim of the cupola above (fig. 4.2). While some scenes can be easily read both visually and textually by visitors, others are far from view; their content may only be guessed at by the viewer. If these ex-votos are testaments to the Madonna's intervention in daily life, why place them so far from view as to render them illegible?

One possible explanation is that ex-votos function fundamentally as a physical signifier of the relationship between the devotee and the Madonna: each acts as a material manifestation of a vow, regardless of the visibility of its details. For example, placement at the rim of the cupola, well beyond the range of clear human

sight and at a location that in Christian tradition has celestial associations, reminds visitors that these ex-votos are gifts meant to be seen from heaven. Although these ex-votos are offerings to the Madonna, they are placed in a public church to be viewed by visitors as a testament to the cult's efficacy. When ex-votos are added to the church, it is also important to devotees dedicating them to know that they are forever included in this holy space, under the protection of Mary and in the spiritual community of all the people graced by her miracles, regardless of their visibility. As the tiles were accumulated in dozens and then hundreds, the natural progression was to add them higher on the walls. Each painted tile shows not only the grateful worshipper, but the painted image of the Madonna and Child between the branches of the oak tree. Although they are not all identical, this repetition of content creates an atmosphere inside the church structure in which it is not necessary to “read” all the images to know what they signify. The content of the tiles is implicit in the fact that they are hanging on the walls; they are testaments to graces received from the Madonna dei Bagni. This impressive display impacts the viewer not just because of the content painted on the tiles; rather, it is the *quantity* of the tiles embedded into the church walls that impresses the visitor with the sacred and efficacious presence of the Madonna dei Bagni.

Like the tiles placed aloft, the original image of the Madonna and Child painted on a ceramic cup located behind the altar is so small that it is difficult for visitors to see. The repetition of the image in each of the hundreds of painted tiles in the space increases its visibility, and underscores its importance, its presence, and its

authority. The body of tiles legitimizes the cult, promotes its authority, and speaks the histories of the people who have been touched by it. As a corpus of miracles marked onto the walls of the church body, the ex-votos displayed in this manner represent a continuously-updated archive of the community's memories for over three hundred sixty years. It is interesting to note that despite the church existing in a highly technological society today, these maiolica tiles continue to be the most effective repositories of data. Perhaps the physicality of their material nature contributes more to their permanence and presence than the pixels of the digital world. It is significant that Deruta's maiolica ex-voto practice continues and flourishes despite the proliferation of the digital in Italian daily life. The materiality of these ex-votos is important in terms of creating a spiritual continuum for devotees as well as making up the physical body of the church.

The art historian Fredrika Jacobs notes that narrative-painted panel ex-votos known as *tavolette* displayed together "...presented prospective petitioners with a reassuring index of the efficacious presence of the divine on earth."²²⁶ However, the *tavolette* Jacobs refers to tended to be ephemeral in nature and have been periodically swept clean when the number of testimonies grew too large for the available space. Unlike other types of ex-votos which are habitually removed from their original placement over time, the community associated with the Madonna dei Bagni has instead insisted on memorializing and solidifying their maiolica ex-votos in place.

²²⁶ Jacobs, Fredrika. 2016. "Five. Humble Offerings: Votive Panel Paintings in Renaissance Italy" in *Ex Voto*. Edited by Ittai Weinryb. United States: Bard Graduate Center, 140.

This sentiment has intensified over the past one hundred years. Since the church's foundation, all tiles had been hung on the walls with wire as evidenced by a pair of holes for the wire to pass through at the top (and sometimes additionally the bottom) of each tile. During a restoration of the church from 1925-1926, it was decided to cement all tiles into the church's walls, locating each permanently in its original space. All ex-votos added later followed suit.

The act of cementing the tiles into the walls intensifies the significance of the materiality of ex-votos as they became part of the church structure. Although the community already had chosen to memorialize their miraculous memories on durable maiolica tiles, these could still have been removed. In fact, this has happened with other maiolica ex-votos which predated the Madonna dei Bagni, today found in various museums around the world. The tiles permanently placed on the walls became building blocks making up the body of the church; a body in the sense of a church structure, but also theologically in terms of the body of Mary or the body of Christ made up by the *ecclesia* of believers—each tile represents a church community member, whether present or past.²²⁷ While each tile individually houses the hopes and gratitude of the worshipper, together the body of ex-votos empowers these collective feelings. While the community has inscribed their memories onto the walls of the

²²⁷ Many scriptural passages refer to this idea, for example: “For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many.” — 1 Corinthians 12:12–14

church with their permanence in terms of placement and material, the memories painted on tiles then inscribe themselves onto the spiritual minds of the community members. As a body of images, the ex-voto tiles represent something emblematic of communal spirit.

Memory and Sacred Space

Images on painted ex-votos represent remarkable events in the lives of people past and present, and although tiles serve as personal testaments to Mary and God, they are also a testimony to all visitors to the church who gaze upon them. Marianne Hirsch notes that images; "...do more than to represent scenes and experiences of the past: they can communicate an emotional or bodily experience to us by evoking our own emotional and bodily memories. They produce affect in the viewer, speaking from the body's sensations, rather than speaking of, or representing the past."²²⁸ Rather than simply recording the miracles in a written document like a miracle book—an historic tome that could be opened and closed when desired—the visual immediacy of images grounds the viewer in the present. The simple act of walking into the Madonna dei Bagni envelops the visitor in history as the miracles are placed into the walls of a living church offering an overload of visual stimulation, making past miracles a living present through representation.

²²⁸ Hirsch, Marianne. 2002. "Marked by Memory: Feminist Reflections on Trauma and Transmission." In *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*, edited by Nancy K. Miller and Jason Daniel Tougaw. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 72.

This relates to Hirsh's notion of postmemory, or the remembering of a significant event by a later party who did not originally experience the event. Hirsh points out that: “Postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through repetition or reenactment but through precious representations that themselves become the objects of projection and recreation. ... It is a question of adopting the traumatic experiences—and thus also the memories—of others as experiences one might oneself have had, and thus of inscribing them into one’s own life stories.”²²⁹ Although the experiences documented in ex-votos are not necessarily always traumatic, these images that are left on the walls of the church by the local community mark the communal body; the miraculous events are experienced collectively. Through ex-voto imagery, the community is made aware of the stories of their contemporaries and their ancestors and adopt them as their own.

Through this process, the tiles function in a “chain of memory,” a term coined by the French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger. According to Hervieu-Léger, a chain of memory recalls a past which gives meaning to the present and contains the future, another way to understand timefulness.²³⁰ The material testament to miracles at the Madonna dei Bagni is used to pass on religious memory. The “chain of memory” in the Madonna dei Bagni uses images to articulate religious identity not

²²⁹ Ibid, 76.

²³⁰ Hervieu-Léger, Danièle. 2000. *Religion as a Chain of Memory*. New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press.

only in direct contact from parent to child or grandparent to grandchild: it is not confined to familial chain of memory but can transcend centuries of time and hold meaning for the future as well. These concepts not only pertain to tiles on an individual scale where information or feeling is passed from person to person. The levels of remembrance in the Madonna dei Bagni are more complex than individual memory, as the space is invested with hundreds of miraculous memories visualized on tiles and covering the walls of the church.



Fig. 4.4. Maiolica ex-voto from the Madonna dei Bagni, 1699.



Fig. 4.5. Ex-voto made for the Madonna dei Bagni, 2020.

One tile, dated 1699, shows a sick figure lying in a typical canopied bed from the time (fig. 4.4). Four women dressed in yellow, green, and blue kneel, rosaries in hand, next to the bed. These prayerful subjects look up at the Madonna and Child perched among the branches of the oak tree. Another tile dated to March 2020 shows a strikingly similar scene (fig. 4.5). In the latter image, two figures lie in a canopied bed while five figures dressed in yellow, green, and blue kneel nearby, rosaries in hand. The composition is replicated almost exactly save for a short inscription on the 2020 tile stating that the tile was made in thanks for salvation from the pandemic. Although it is unclear what type of malady caused the illness in the 1699 tile, what is certain is that in both of these cases the Madonna and Child are accredited with the healing of direly ill people. This is acknowledged by the inclusion of the letters PGR on both tiles—*per grazia ricevuta*. Although the memory of the exact illness on the older tile is lost, the replication of the subject matter in a stylistically similar way in newer tiles gives renewed meaning to these older images. The stylistic and compositional similarity between old and new creates a parallel between the two. This corresponds with observations made by the sociologist Emily Keightly, who writes: “Remembering is an active reconciliation of past and present. The meaning of the past in relation to the present is what is at stake here; memories are important as they bring our changing sense of who we are and who we were, coherently into view

of one another.”²³¹ The similarity between these two tiles highlights the continuity not just of the cult, but the continuity of religious identity to community members.

In addition to a “chain of memory,” the church of the Madonna dei Bagni functions as a memory space on a different level through collective memory. The concepts of individual and collective memory were developed by the French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in his work *The Collective Memory*, first published posthumously in 1950.²³² Halbwachs points out that the ways human beings make memories and maintain memories is inextricably connected to others.²³³ The smaller the group of people who remember an event, the tighter the collective memory of the group. He compares this to the collective memory of a village versus the collective memory of an entire nation. The collective memory of a small town, like Deruta (pop. circa 9,500), is stronger because the inhabitants observe each other in greater detail and on a more individualized scale.²³⁴ These concepts directly relate to the Madonna dei Bagni because the cult exists in a small community and is impacted by the sense of communal memory linked to the structure. This is also a matter of memory coherence because fewer people are involved, and they are socially and culturally educated in the same community. Halbwachs points out that collective

²³¹ Keightley, Emily. 2010. “Remembering Research: Memory and Methodology in the Social Sciences.” *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 13 (1): 55–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570802605440>.

²³² Halbwachs, Maurice. 1980. *The Collective Memory*. New York: Harper & Row.

²³³ “Our confidence in the accuracy of our impression increases, of course, if it can be supported by others’ remembrances also.” *Ibid*, 22.

²³⁴ *Ibid*, 78.

memory is sustained by socio-cultural space—such as the church of the Madonna dei Bagni. The space provides a way devotees can recall their own individual memories and the memories of their predecessors through the tiles which are set into the walls.

This space, filled with individual and collective memories, cannot help but promote feelings of communal identity. The collective memories stored in the Madonna dei Bagni can participate in making up the religious, cultural and civic identity of the parishioners. These ex-votos can bolster feelings of pride and belonging: communal bonds are reinforced through the church structure and appear to span hundreds of years, connecting the past to the present.

Since collective memory is also activated at memorials or other types of civic buildings, it is important to acknowledge how the Madonna dei Bagni differs from such spaces: it is a religious site, and therefore collective memory takes on a specific meaning within the space. According to Halbwachs, any regular church creates a space in which the congregation members solidify individual and collective memory. But since the space inside the Madonna dei Bagni houses a venerated image and is covered in tiles representing miracles that have occurred to members of the community for hundreds of years, this particular sacred structure must greatly intensify this feeling of community and identity. In this way, it is not only the individual tiles which are important to remembering, but the space of the church itself which becomes crucial.

Other types of spaces, such as the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C. or the 9/11 Memorial at Ground Zero in New York City, are also considered

sacred.²³⁵ Like a church, they are spaces that are about communing with the intangible. They are also spaces in which votives are left as gifts to those that were lost. However, these votives are not left to sainted persons in a religious context. Rather, these resonate as objects left in melancholic remembrance of those lost and to recognize the sacrifices they made. Votive offerings left in a church are messages of gratitude to the divine. While both sites may be considered sacred, the gifts left in each space register in different emotional and political ways. The positive content represented on ex-votos (as they are made in thanks for miracles received or prayers answered) also contributes to the different nature of a religious community space versus a civic space or memorial. For example, while a war memorial monumentalizes sacrifice and loss and can be a place of mourning, the miraculous nature of the events commemorated by ex-votos communicates memories of salvation and feelings of hope for future blessings.

Furthermore, the Madonna dei Bagni does not function simply as a memorial to past miracles. Memorials are generally created once in relation to an event of the past and remain largely unchanged apart from ephemeral offerings. While memorials commemorate an event in the past, the Madonna dei Bagni celebrates an ongoing relationship with the divine and holy that is manifested in a continuous flow of miraculous events. The Madonna dei Bagni is also a space where weekly, monthly, and annual rituals are performed. These rituals occur in a dynamic space in which

²³⁵ For a detailed discussion of these types of spaces see David Morgan. 2018. "Votive Giving Today" in *Agents of Faith: Votive Objects in Time and Place*. Edited by Ittai Weinryb. New York: Bard Graduate Center Gallery, 109–127.

new ex-votos are continuously added to the walls. These new memories are integrated into existing memories from the past: memory is both recalled and recreated in this space. The result is a hierochronotopy which is constantly evolving. As pointed out by social anthropologist Paul Connerton, “images of the past and recollected knowledge of the past are conveyed and sustained by (more or less) ritual performances.”²³⁶ It is therefore ritual such as masses, celebrations and pilgrimages (both individual and collective) which not only activate the space as sacred, but also activate individual and collective memories, creating a sense of communal identity.

Understanding Sacred Time

Up to this point I have addressed how sacred space is created through ritual and display infused with memory and identity. Let us now move on to an integration of timefulness. Space and time are inextricably connected. According to theoretical physicist Albert Einstein’s *Theory of Relativity*, time is, in fact, just another dimension of space.²³⁷ It follows then, that a discussion of sacred space cannot be complete without unpacking sacred time. Time can be conceptualized in various ways in relation to the sacred. It can be defined as linear, cyclical, eschatological, liturgical, or as *chronos* and *kairos*. The most common understanding of time in Western cultures is of course, linear time. With linear time we think of a beginning point (the

²³⁶ Connerton, Paul. 1989. *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 38.

²³⁷ Tauber, Gerald E., and Albert Einstein. 1979. *Albert Einstein’s Theory of General Relativity*. New York: Crown Publishers.

Big Bang, the birth of a child, etc) and an arrow moving forward along in a straight path until something ends, usually marked with a death. Linear time can but understood as quantitative, made up of seconds, minutes, days, or years. In ancient Greek this is referred to as *chronos*, a term that I will return to below.

Sacred time can also be understood in terms of the liturgical calendar, which is cyclical. Liturgical hours mark the passing of the day; prayers are said with the movement of the sun across the sky (at dawn, sunrise, midmorning, etc). Liturgical time applies not only to the repeated cycles of the day, but also of the year; this includes celebrations like Christmas, Lent, Easter, etc. These cycles include feasting and fasting which are mechanisms used to put a worshipper into a sacred time cycle and mark the rhythm of monastic or Roman Catholic life. The celebrations of events of the past (such as Christmas, Lent and Easter) as relevant in the present and for the future is an important aspect of liturgical time.

Sacred time can also be understood as eschatological time, which is biblical time. Biblical time is linear in that there was the beginning, marked by the creation of the universe by God, and an upcoming end point concluding with judgement day. However, biblical time also implies infinite time, as God has no beginning and no end. God is infinite, or beyond time.

Another way of understanding sacred time is through the Greek term *kairos*. While *chronos* is linear and quantitative, *kairos* is about a moment—in Christian theology this can specifically refer to the breaking in of the divine into linear time,

like a lightning bolt.²³⁸ This may be understood as theophany—the self-revelation of God to humankind such as God appearing in the burning bush to Moses. *Kairos* might also be understood as a miracle—an opportune moment where God touched mankind in otherwise inexplicable ways, like the miracles which are depicted on the walls of the Madonna dei Bagni.

The following sections will address how sacred-time-space is indicated at the Madonna dei Bagni. I consider the following questions: how does the representation of the cult image of the Virgin and Child impact notions of time? How does the tree encased at the main altar also impact the articulation of time? How is miraculous time indicated on the tiles themselves? Through a discussion of these questions, I argue that the ex-votos in concert with the miraculous image in the Madonna dei Bagni not only create a sacred space, but a *timeful* sacred space where past, present and future coexist.

The Timeful Image of the Madonna and Child and the Timeful Tree

Due to the physical nature of the maiolica image of the Madonna and Child at the church of the Madonna dei Bagni, we are able to know approximately when it was made. Therefore, the image, to some extent, is fixed in time. However, the Madonna

²³⁸ For a discussion on *chronos* and *kairos* see for example: Ó Murchadha, Felix. 2014. *The Time of Revolution: Kairos and Chronos in Heidegger*. London; Bloomsbury; and Hill, John Spencer. 1997. *Infinity, Faith, and Time: Christian Humanism and Renaissance Literature*. Montreal; McGill-Queen's University Press, 69-77.

has remained an active part of community life over the years, making it not only timeless, but timeful. The image of the Madonna and Child between the branches of the oak tree is repeated on the hundreds of tiles which surround it. This shows the appearance and activation of the sacred image in the lives of the community over time, continuing into the present. The image is timeful because Mary is holding Christ—this can be an allusion to the *pietà* at his death. Christ is naked, emphasizing his humanity and ultimately his death and resurrection. Christ holds an orb, showing his power over the terrestrial earth—both through its creation and its redemption. In these ways the sacred image of the Madonna and Child references past as well as future events on the eschatological timeline.

The ritual of mass is performed in all churches in relation to the liturgical calendar and is therefore a cyclical and reliable miracle. It is hierochronotopic in nature because it re-enacts the incarnation and sacrifice of Christ and also references the original sin (eating the forbidden fruit) which is reversed through the eating of the fruit of life (Christ) and foreshadows the return to the Kingdom of God at the end of time. In the church of the Madonna dei Bagni, the miraculous image of the Madonna, circular in form, is placed in a sunburst frame above the main altar (fig. 4.6). As the priest raises the host in blessing during mass, the host aligns in size, shape and placement with the framed Madonna and Child. This links the image of Christ made flesh with the miracle of transubstantiation occurring before it. Christ's incarnation and sacrifice depicted in the image are also re-enacted through the mass. The cult

image and the tree at the main altar add to this hierochronoty in order to encompass the local community in the trajectory of sacred history and the promise of salvation.



Fig. 4.6. The miracle-working image of the Madonna dei Bagni and the oak tree encased at the main altar of the church.

The tree at the main altar of the church of the Madonna dei Bagni references specific spatio-temporal coordinates about the origination of the cult. It firmly locates the cult in a specific space as the roots reached down into the earth in that specific location. In addition, the tree creates a hierochronotopic environment as it references different moments of eschatological time. For one, it can refer to the Tree of

Knowledge of Good and Evil and/or the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. This reference calls to the mind the beginning of linear time, the fall of man and the need for Christ's coming. In combination with the image of the Madonna, a tree can also reference Mary as a second Eve, feeding salvation to the world through her son with another tree (the cross) as opposed to Eve feeding death to the world through her interaction with the Tree of Knowledge (see Chapter 3).²³⁹ These trees both reference the past (fall of man) and the present (current redemption through Christ). The tree also can reference the future of eschatological time. In Revelation the New Jerusalem is centered around the Tree of Life.²⁴⁰ In these ways the tree at the altar of the Madonna dei Bagni references past, present and future: these times are collapsed into one creating a timeful sacred space. Since this tree is a local landmark, and the cult image is also locally produced, they integrate the local community in the sacred history that they hierochronotopically reference. Hierochronotopy makes the trajectory of salvation more reassuring, and when it encompasses local elements, that reassurance also acquires a local dimension. Now that we have established how timefulness is indicated through the cult image and the tree encased at the main altar,

²³⁹ Evangelatou, Maria. 2016. "Botanical exegesis in God's creation: the polyvalent meaning of plants on the Salerno Ivories" in *The Salerno Ivories: Objects, Histories, Contexts*. Dell'Acqua, Francesca, Anthony Cutler, Herbert L. Kessler, Avinoam Shalem, and Gerhard Wolf, eds. Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 147.

²⁴⁰ Evangelatou, Maria. 2021. "Hierochronotopy: Stepping into timeful space through Bonnano's twelfth-century door for the Pisa cathedral" in *Icons of Space: Advances in Hierotopy*. Edited by Jelena Bogdanović. London ; Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 139.

let us turn to how sacred time is expressed in the body of hundreds of maiolica ex-votos which line the walls of the church.

Time on Ex-Voto Tiles

The way that time is indicated on the earliest tiles—those dating to the second half of the seventeenth century—is not as straightforward as what is painted on the clay’s surface. It must be noted that originally these images were paintings on wood (*tavolette*) rather than paintings on maiolica ceramic. The fact that they have been transformed into paintings on ceramic is an important deviation from their original format. After only thirty years, the original *tavolette* were starting to deteriorate; rather than lose these images as ephemeral memories which pass with each generation, the community chose to memorialize them in a more permanent material. The insistence on preserving these kairological memories indicates that what is depicted on them did not resonate with the community as events relegated to past generations—rather they were relevant events which were brought into their present through preservation. The insistence of the relevancy on these images has spanned centuries, weaving kairological events into a chronological continuum. The sentiment was replicated again in 1925–26 when the church of the Madonna dei Bagni was restored, and it was decided to cement all tiles permanently into the walls. With this move the community again insisted on maintaining the ex-votos as permanent fixtures in the church sanctuary.

The images of *kairos*, fixed on the walls permanently, shifted the meaning of the ex-votos. They were not just miraculous events which occurred once, but events which continue to occur on the walls of the church space through re-presentation. Over the course of more than 350 years, the community's decisions and actions regarding the ex-votos has shown that they do not merely signify popular devotional ephemera—rather they are important objects which contain relevant imagery to contemporary viewers and worshippers. The ex-votos at the Madonna dei Bagni are not transitory objects like many other types of ex-votos tend to be—in this case they physically became part of the permanent church structure. The maiolica tiles are therefore more than just mere decorations on the walls, they brought and continue to bring past miracles into the viewer's present through direct confrontation with imagery. The materials used—maiolica ceramics—further bolster the feeling of miraculous presence and the timelessness, or rather timefulness, of miracles. This is achieved through a repetition of the use of traditional colors across time—creating a never-fading selection of miraculous imagery. The nature of maiolica means that images painted 350 years ago or three years ago appear in similar color and style creating a cohesive sense of time across the walls. There are, however, particular details in the imagery on early tiles and more contemporary tiles discussed in Chapter 2 to which we must return.

The painted ex-votos in the Madonna dei Bagni are unique for their use of the color yellow to point to divine presence on the tiles. This is indicated by rays of yellow radiating from the cult image onto devotees, or simply by utilizing this color

for the background of these miraculous scenes. Yellow is used as an indicator of kairological events in the otherwise ordinary lives of believers. This breaking in of the divine into daily lives is also alluded to by the use of stage-like curtains which reveal miraculous scenes to the viewer. The use of veils or curtains to cover sacred objects was a commonly understood trope during the early modern period, as also previously discussed in Chapter 2. I believe that the use of peeled-back curtains in the ex-votos of the Madonna dei Bagni indicate to the viewer the revelation of a miraculous moment, yet another marker of *kairos*.

Together, hundreds of kairological images are fixed into the walls of the Madonna dei Bagni. Woven together, these ex-votos create *kairochronos*; the integration of events of *kairos* into the continuum of *chronos*. In concert with the sacred image of the Madonna and Child placed between the branches of the tree and rituals which are performed in the space, these elements work together to create a hierochronotopic space saturated with evidentiary proof of *kairos* in the community.

Maintaining timefulness after trauma to the church body

Although maiolica tiles are more permanent forms of ex-voto giving compared to more popular ephemeral variations, like all material elements they too are susceptible to destruction. Tragedy struck the Madonna dei Bagni in 1976 when thieves broke in and forcibly chipped eight ex-voto tiles from the walls. This horrendous act demonstrated the cultural value of the maiolica ex-votos, as well as their monetary value on the black market. While this seemed an atrocity to the locals at the time, it

paled in comparison to a second theft which took place just a few years later in 1980. This second violation saw the theft of 201 tiles and left forty broken on the pavement, including the tile depicting the first miracle. The loss resulted in considerable damage to the church body and also created gaping holes in the physicality of collective memory. In a 2010 publication, the church priest at the time described his recollections of the event: “I remember the emotion, the despair, the desperation of that terrible morning when I entered into the church, violated and raped for the second time [...] I did not know where to look, where to rest my eyes: it was the body of your woman flayed alive like Saint Bartholomew, and if that were not enough, that same skin was then made into confetti and thrown in handfuls onto the floor. I remember the feeling of nausea that gripped me like a clamp, leaving me breathless.”²⁴¹

This dramatic quote clearly demonstrates the priest’s connection to the structure. The tiles that lined the walls held meaning in excess of mere decorations in an edifice used for liturgical purposes. He described the interior as his lady, and he compares the damage to her as a rape and flaying.²⁴²

²⁴¹ *“Ricordo l’emozione, lo scoramento, la disperazione di quella terribile mattina, quando entrai in quella chiesa violata e stuprata per la seconda volta in due giorni: non sapevi dove guardare, dove posare gli occhi: era il corpo della tua donna scorticato vivo come un san Bartolomeo, della cui pelle, come non bastasse, averssero poi fatto coriandoli per gettarli a piene mani sul pavimento. Ricordo il senso di nausea che mi afferrò, come una morsa, lasciandomi senza respiro.”* Santantoni Menichelli, Antonio. 2010. *Ex-voto: Arte e fede nel santuario della Madonna del Bagno*. Perugia: Effe, 34.

²⁴² A note about the use of the word “lady” in relation to the church structure in this quote. The term for church (*chiesa*) is feminine in Italian. Perhaps all churches can be gendered in this way as spaces connected with Mary as Ecclesia. In the quote above the priest references the church interior as *il*

The reaction of this one individual priest was shared by many. Not only was it an attack on the church structure, but it resonated as an attack on the community's heritage and therefore their identity as well. The violation created a hole in the community's history and the damage reverberated through the community in emotional ways: it produced affect. The collective emotion—combined with religious devotion—promoted the community to take action following this incident. The community's reaction indicates that the body of tiles not only made up the physical structure of the church, but also they had been imprinted into the spiritual minds of individual community members. The violation of tiles created a spiritual wound in the body of the community. This attack on identity was felt not only in spiritual terms, but also in visceral and emotional ways as the attack itself was a physically destructive act which erased long-standing cultural heritage and identity markers. Enough people felt this communal affect to take action to repair the gaping holes in their collective memory. Despite the devastating extent of the damage, they worked together to repair the Madonna dei Bagni church. According to the priest, this restoration made the church even more beautiful than before.²⁴³

corpo della tua donna or “the body of your lady”. This is particularly appropriate considering that the church of the Madonna dei Bagni is dedicated to the Madonna. The term Madonna stems from the two words *ma donna* meaning “my lady”. It is therefore fitting that the priest recalls the church structure utilizing the term *donna*.

²⁴³ Santantoni Menichelli, Antonio. 2010. *Ex-voto: Arte e fede nel santuario della Madonna del Bagno*. Perugia: Effe, 34.



Fig. 4.7. Tile fragments and broken tiles re-cemented into the church walls of Madonna dei Bagni.

Over time, about half of the tiles were recovered from the theft, while others which were not recovered were faithfully recreated by local ceramic artists and re-cemented into the walls.²⁴⁴ Upon restoration, some original broken tile fragments were returned to the walls to live on as reminders—or scars—of the trauma suffered by the church body (fig. 4.7). These scars serve as evidential proof of the healing of the community. Just as the body of Christ was marked with the scars from his sacrifice, the church body does not appear in pristine condition, but bears the marks that tell the story of its salvation. Additionally, these fragmented tiles are a

²⁴⁴ Tiles continue to be recovered from the theft. The most recent tile from this theft was returned to the church in 2021.

commemoration of the trauma and as such they remind the community that they must be vigilant about the protection of their church.



Fig. 4.8. Tile created to commemorate the restoration of the Madonna dei Bagni, 1987.

Two commemorative tiles were made for the reopening of the church in 1987, after seven years of restoration. One of these tiles shows members of the community engaged in all manner of restoration of the church structure, on scaffolding and ladders, painting walls, creating and affixing tiles, mopping the floor, repairing the roof, landscaping, chopping wood, and even playing the organ (fig.4.8). The names of the people reconstructing the church are written on the tile along the edges. A second commemorative tile portrays a procession leading to the church structure, with a giant

depiction of the Madonna and Child in the tree (fig. 4.9). Written on the left-hand side of the tile is the following heartfelt description:

“Today your long and sad seven years is now only a memory. The wounds that the barbaric hand of man inflicted are at last healed. Today you are more beautiful than ever. House of Mary and our cradle of faith, affection, art and memories. Reopened to gather the prayers of the children, to soothe the new and ancient pains, to comfort the tired hearts of pilgrims from heaven. Today Casalina melts with humble joy and gratefulness. This votive [is dedicated] to the Mother of God. Antonio Santantoni, Rector and Parish Priest.”²⁴⁵



Fig. 4.9. Commemorative tile, 1987.

²⁴⁵ 6 Settembre 1987 “Oggi la tua più lunga e triste settimana di anni è ormai solo un ricordo; le ferite che il tempo incolpevole e la barbara mano dell’uomo t’inflissero sono alfine sanate. Oggi più bella risplendi casa di Maria, e nostra, culla di fede, d’affetti, d’arte e di memorie: riaperta ad accogliere la preghiera dei figli, a lenire i nuovi e sempre antichi dolori, a confortare i cuori stanchi dei pellegrini del cielo. Oggi Casalina sciogli, con gioia umile e grata, il suo voto alla Madre di Dio.” Antonio Santantoni Rettore e Parroco.

This is the same priest who wrote about his reaction to the theft, quoted above. In this votive tile, he notes this church is a cradle of memories, that it is a space in which the Madonna soothes new and ancient pains. These types of phrases connect the contemporary worshippers with the past miracles, referring to a sense of continuity which is maintained through the church structure.

Instead of placing the remaining original tiles in the museum as the community did with ten ex-voto tiles in the nearby church of the Madonna delle Piagge (see Chapter 2), this same community claimed their authority in maintaining the sacred space of Madonna dei Bagni, insisting that the material instantiations of their miraculous memories be repaired and re-cemented into the church walls.



Fig. 4.10. Ex-voto depicting the interior of the Madonna dei Bagni, 1995.

Following the repair, a new trend in ex-voto imagery has emerged—tiles depicting the church’s exterior as well as its interior (fig. 4.10). The earliest tiles in the Madonna dei Bagni often depict the Madonna and Child in the tree at an altar, but the church structure and ex-voto tiles were never referenced on the ex-voto tiles at the time the 1983 catalog was published. After the church's restoration in 1987, it is not just the Madonna and Child in the tree which appear on tiles, but the church structure itself. This new self-referential theme reflects a conscious effort to convey the resilience of the church and its community. The building is depicted alongside the believers, as a member of the congregation.

In fig. 4.10 we see four worshippers kneeling at the altar of the Madonna dei Bagni. They are surrounded by rectangles and squares referencing the tidy display of ex-votos on the walls of the church. This scene does not depict broken tiles, or the trauma to the church body, but instead references the unbroken continuity between the tiles of the past and the tiles of the present. These images of the church interior such as fig. 4.10 seem to be a way to erase or heal the trauma. It shows the pride of the community and of individual devotees and artists to belong to such a long tradition which they are committed to continuing and memorializing. This is reinforced by the depiction of twentieth-century devotees in seventeenth-century attire in the tile. It gives a sense of a community blessed by continuous miracles, rewarded for steadfast faith, and protected in recognition of their continuous devotion over the centuries.

Looking at the ex-votos from this perspective resonates with the concept of agency described by the anthropologist Alfred Gell. Gell's primary agents, or sentient beings, are those who pray or worship at the Madonna dei Bagni. Gell's secondary agents, or artifacts "through which primary agents distribute their agency in the causal milieu, and thus render their agency effective" include the cult image, individual ex-voto tiles, and also the collective body of all the displayed ex-voto tiles.²⁴⁶ According to Gell, secondary agents "are not just instruments used by social agents but ultimately function as agents themselves."²⁴⁷ As the tiles make up the body of the church, that body, although not sentient, is imbued with agency. The sacred space of the church structure has come to signify a community member. As a community member, the church's body contains the marks of memory it shares with the other community members. It is the elder, both enshrining and sharing the most precious memories across time.

The example of the destruction of a much more famous church in recent years can shed more light on the case of the Madonna dei Bagni. In 2019 the Cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris caught fire. In this moment of collective crisis, the world came together to witness the carnage as Our Lady burned like Jeanne d'Arc before their

²⁴⁶ Many scriptural passages refer to this idea, for example: "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many." — 1 Corinthians 12:12–14

²⁴⁷ Gell, Alfred. 1998. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford, 20.

eyes. Clearly, the damage to the 860-year-old building instigated very strong feelings, not only among the Parisians or French, but worldwide. Together the world watched the body of Notre Dame crumble as the spire fell to the flames, eliciting a wave of emotions. Through the centuries, Notre Dame had survived a multitude of disasters yet still stood strong as a symbol of French resilience. The professor of religious studies David Morgan points out: “One may be Jewish, Muslim, Protestant, or atheist and still, as a French citizen, regard the need to rebuild the cathedral as a matter of national urgency... The religion in question is not about deities or spirit beings, the afterlife, or transcendent powers of any sort. It is about... the nation. The cathedral is the thing... that embodies and produces them as people.”²⁴⁸ As with the collective reaction to Notre Dame de Paris, the community’s reaction to the destruction of the Madonna dei Bagni called for repairs and restoration—it was not an edifice that could be lost. The church represented the body, the mother, the collective memory, and collective identity of a group of people that resonated religiously and culturally and that had to be preserved.

The resilience of the community associated with the Madonna dei Bagni has spanned hundreds of years. Particularly significant decisions along this path have been the first ex-voto paintings recreated on tiles in 1687, the permanent cementing of all ex-votos into the church structure since 1925-26, and the recreation and restoration of lost and damaged tiles in 1987. In recent years, the number of ex-votos has

²⁴⁸ Morgan, David. 2021. *The Thing About Religion An Introduction to the Material Study of Religions*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 154.

continued to grow. Today the Madonna dei Bagni is still a living cult, with new tiles added every year. In this way, alterations to the sacred space of the church structure continue to happen consistently over time, chronicling divine intervention in the daily life of the local community for over 350 years via the medium of maiolica. It is through this continuous use that the timeful sacred space is both created and sustained by community members.

Conclusion

This chapter builds upon elements discussed in previous chapters. While Chapters 1 and 2 addressed the materiality of ex-votos and the unique features of maiolica ex-votos in the Madonna dei Bagni, this chapter pushed the discussion forward by analyzing how these particular elements help to articulate a hierochronotopic environment. Likewise, Chapter 3 discussed how the Virgin Mary creates sacred space in the Madonna dei Bagni, a discussion I returned to in this chapter with an integration of timefulness. I have also addressed how memory is intrinsic to the discussion of the creation of sacred-time-space. Lastly, this chapter looked at a case study in time where the seemingly permanent display of ex-votos was attacked and partially destroyed. This demonstrated the evocative nature of this particular body of images to the local community who fought to maintain and restore their beloved church.

Chapter 5: Conclusion



Fig. 5.1. Interior of the Madonna dei Bagni, Deruta.

Introduction

This dissertation is a case study of the church of the Madonna dei Bagni near Deruta, Italy (fig. 5.1). In particular, I focus on the function of the hundreds of maiolica ex-votos which line the walls of the church—a unique practice in Italy, if not the world. In the previous chapters, I have explored the meaning and signification of the medium of maiolica in comparison to other common ex-voto materials. I have also addressed the ex-votos' relationship with the cult image of the Madonna and Child between the branches of an oak tree. In the penultimate chapter, I explored how these maiolica ex-

votos are tied to memory and the creation of sacred space and sacred-time-space. In this final chapter I return to a broader scope. How does the Madonna dei Bagni fit into a larger discussion of Roman Catholic devotional practices both in Italy and worldwide? I look at some possible answers while also pointing to ideas for future research.

The Madonna dei Bagni and Italy

As noted at the beginning of Chapter 4, the Madonna dei Bagni does not exist in isolation, but is part of a larger sacred landscape. While research on devotional imagery has been produced for the urban areas of Rome and Florence, a focused study of miraculous images in Umbria is lacking.²⁴⁹ Most research has instead focused on the sacred landscape of Umbria in relation to Saint Francis of Assisi and other local saints.²⁵⁰ While it is true that there have indeed been many saints who hailed from the region, there are also many miracle-working images that sustain their own orbits of devotion. The majority of these miracle-working images are of the Virgin Mary, of which the Madonna dei Bagni is one example.²⁵¹ As such, the Madonna dei Bagni is just one in a constellation of sacred sites in Umbria and central Italy. How does this site of devotion fit into a larger sacred landscape?

²⁴⁹ Belting, Hans., and E. F. N. Jephcott. 1994. *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; and Holmes, Megan. 2013. *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

²⁵⁰ Faure, Gabriel. 1925. *The Land of St. Francis of Assisi: Assisi and Perugia*. Boston: Hale, Cushman & Flint.

²⁵¹ See Mario Sensi, Mario Tosti and Corrado Fratini, eds. 2002. *Santuari del territorio della provincia di Perugia*. Quattroemme, Perugia.

While many miracle-working images of the Madonna exist in Umbria, apart from the Madonna dei Bagni, ex-voto displays are limited to the ubiquitous silver hearts. Very few *tavolette* can be found in museums of the region, and are limited to very small displays.²⁵² The Madonna dei Bagni is therefore important not just to the local population surrounding the area around Deruta, but also to the entire region of Umbria as the largest, and perhaps only, display of painted ex-votos in a church sanctuary in the region.

Today, if ex-voto collections at shrines exist at all, it is much more common to find them generally relegated to an adjacent museum, as I experienced while visiting the Madonna della Quercia in Viterbo and the Madonna della Milicia in Palermo. One striking exception is the Madonna dell'Arco in Naples. Although many ex-votos are also stored in an adjacent museum at this church, the interior is still filled with hundreds of *tavolette* dating from the early modern period to modern day. Like the Madonna dei Bagni, they are displayed along the walls and pillars, virtually engulfing visitors with miraculous images from past and present (fig. 5.2).

²⁵² In Umbria a handful of *tavolette* can be found at the Museo del Capitolo in Perugia. A few more are also on display at the Pinacoteca Comunale di Bettona.



Fig. 5.2. Interior of the Madonna dell'Arco, Naples.

The sanctuary of the Madonna dell'Arco has been a revered site since the fifteenth century in the community of Sant'Anastasia, today located in the sprawling city of Naples. The sacred image of the Madonna and Child was originally painted on a wall near an arch (hence the name Madonna dell'Arco or Madonna of the Arch). One day in the mid-fifteenth century a man was losing a ball game, and in frustration threw the ball at the image of the Madonna, visibly marking her face. This was seen as the first miracle and a church was constructed to house the miraculous image. The fame of the Madonna dell'Arco increased even more so following events related to a woman named Aurelia del Prete between 1589-90. One day Aurelia was en route to the Madonna dell'Arco with her husband to leave an ex-voto in thanks for a healing.

They brought with them a pig, which was lost in a crowd along the way. Angry for losing her pig, Aurelia cursed the ex-voto they brought with them. It was believed that in response to this act of blasphemy against the Madonna dell'Arco Aurelia later fell gravely ill, to such an extremity that her feet fell off. To this day her feet are kept in an iron cage inside the church as a proof of the miraculous nature of the image of the Madonna dell'Arco.²⁵³

There are many intriguing elements to this story, however, one which presents itself as pertinent to this study is the connection of the miraculous image with the ex-voto. Perhaps the ex-voto was not agentic on its own, but its nature as a gift to the Madonna dell'Arco connected it to the sacred complex that belongs to the sacred image. The respect for this connection between votive gifts and the Madonna dell'Arco is evidenced in the fact that they are still today lining the walls of the church sanctuary, and, like the Madonna dei Bagni, work in concert with the cult image they revere in the creation of sacred space.

How does this example of votive practices in the Madonna dell'Arco compare with those at the Madonna dei Bagni? Devotion to the Madonna dell'Arco, like the Madonna dei Bagni, is not relegated merely to ex-votos. As it is located in a densely packed urban center, there are many satellite street shrines as well as elaborate processions and pilgrimages to the Madonna dell'Arco. As the Madonna dell'Arco exists in an urban center, it therefore has a much larger devotional following. As

²⁵³ D'Antonio, Nino. 1979. *Gli ex voto dipinti e il rituale dei fumenti a Madonna dell'Arco*. Cava dei Tirreni: Di Mauro Editore, 7-18.

such, ex-votos are not relegated to a single material but appear in the thousands in many forms (common forms include *tavolette* in addition to silver hearts and bodily parts, or disused crutches and braces, among others) both in the church sanctuary and the adjoining ex-voto museum.²⁵⁴ Like the Madonna dei Bagni, the paintings displayed in the church interior are arranged in a grid-like pattern. However, there is no indication that they are placed permanently in a particular formation, but may potentially be rearranged as newer images are added to the walls. Older images appear in the nave in aged colors, while newer *tavolette* are placed on particular walls in bright, recently-painted hues. What differs is that the Madonna dei Bagni houses a collection of ex-votos made up of *one* cohesive medium, *permanently* placed onto the walls of the church sanctuary, in vivid, unfading colors. In this way the Madonna dei Bagni demonstrates a sense of continuity of votive practice across time in a single location.

Certainly, large displays of ex-votos in church interiors are not limited to the Madonna dei Bagni and the Madonna dell'Arco in Italy. Since the early modern period we have documentation related copious amounts of ex-votos left at popular Marian sites such as the Santissima Annunziata in Florence, the Madonna del Parto in the church of Sant'Agostino in Rome, or the Virgin of Loreto. Although today ex-votos are still left at these sites, they are periodically "cleaned up". Prints and early photographs show a myriad of votive offerings which once covered Jacopo

²⁵⁴ See Gerardo Imbriano, ed. 2009. *Votum: Museo degli ex voto del Santuario di Madonna dell'Arco*. Napoli: Editrice Domenicana Italiana.

Sansovino's sculpture of the Madonna and Child in the church of Sant'Agostino in Rome (fig. 5.3). Today the sculpture is still widely credited with aiding mothers to conceive and give birth attested to by an ever-changing mass of blue and pink birth ribbons which decorate the shrine, however votive decoration is kept to a minimum compared to the images we see from past eras (fig. 5.4). These types of displays were much more common before the reforms undertaken after the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, the rulings of which completely changed the atmosphere of church sanctuaries. Most churches totally removed the accumulation of ex-votos surrounding their cult images, as seen with the Santissima Annunziata and other votive collections. Even at the Madonna dell'Arco, an adjacent ex-voto museum has been created to house the overflow of votive gifts. This is where the importance of the Madonna dei Bagni really shines. Because of the permanent placement of the ex-votos into the walls of the church structure, we have one of very few records of a painted votive tradition which remains virtually untouched by the reforms of the Second Vatican Council.



Fig. 5.3. Detail of a nineteenth-century prayer card depicting the Madonna del Parto by Jacopo Sansovino covered in ex-votos in the church Sant'Agostino in Rome.

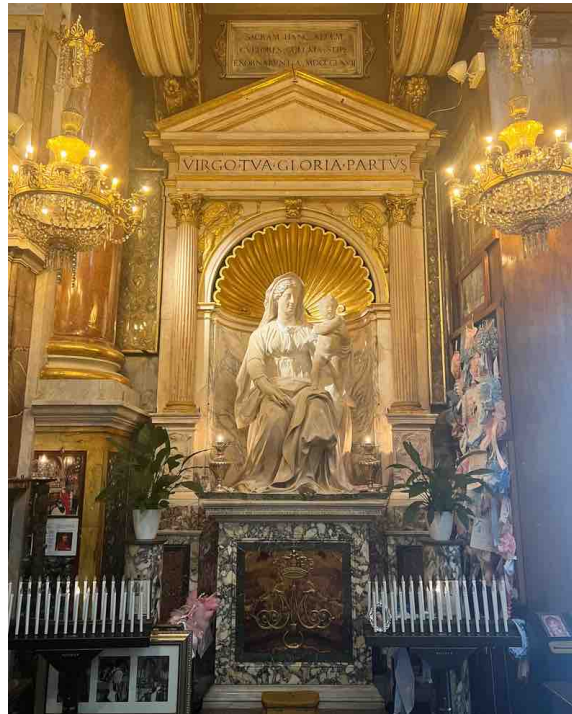


Fig. 5.4. The Madonna del Parto by Jacopo Sansovino, church Sant'Agostino, Rome, 2023.

Ex-votos in Roman Catholic sites farther afield

Now that we have discussed how the Madonna dei Bagni relates to other centers of Marian devotion in Italy, let us consider other devotional sites further afield. As outlined in this dissertation's introduction, ex-votos appear globally, virtually across all time periods. Today Roman Catholic ex-voto practices can be found not just in Italy, but throughout the world. Traditionally, the great three Roman Catholic pilgrimage sites were and continue to be Jerusalem, Rome, and Santiago de Compostela. I have personally visited these three locations (specifically the church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Basilica of Saint Peter and the Cathedral of Santiago) and can report that although pilgrimage and popular devotion is widespread in these locales, they do not permanently display ex-votos in the church sanctuaries. Popular pilgrimage sites related to the Virgin Mary are another story. Let us take, for example, devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico City, perhaps the most visited site for Marian devotion in the Catholic world.

Devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe began, according to the Pious Legend accepted as true by the Roman Catholic Church, as a series of apparitions to an indigenous peasant named Juan Diego on the hill of Tepeyac between December 9-12, in the year 1531. In her final appearance, the Virgin Mary arranged Castilian roses in Juan Diego's *tilma* (a kind of cloak) and sent him to the bishop to reveal her sign to him. Upon releasing his *tilma*, the roses fell to the floor and the miraculous image of the Virgin of Guadalupe was imprinted on his cloak where they had once

been. This is known as the *tilma* image, and it is what one sees framed at the main altar in the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico City today (fig. 5.5).²⁵⁵

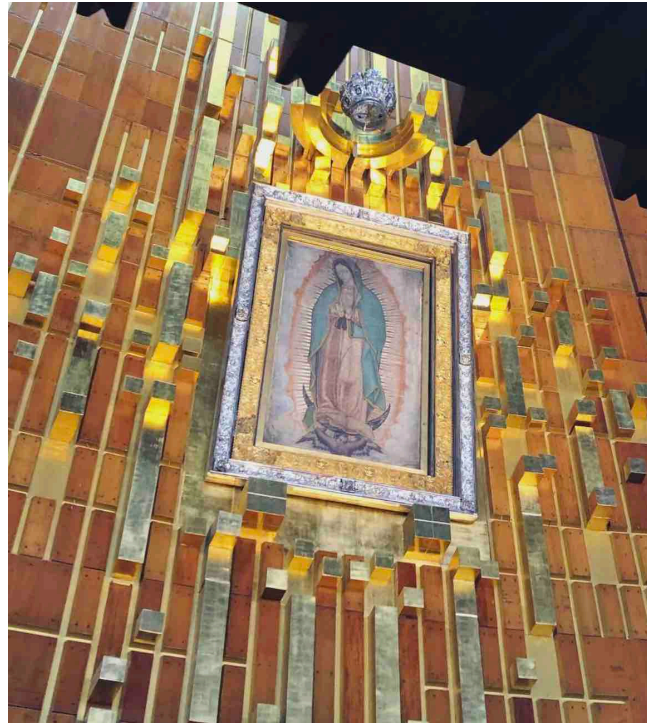


Fig. 5.5. The Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico City.

At the time of the Spanish colonization in what is today Mexico, cultural and religious ties between the Italian peninsula and Spain were strong. Spanish authorities controlled Naples and Sicily during the reign of Charles V in the sixteenth century. Due to cultural overlap, Spanish and Italian elites had common Roman Catholic

²⁵⁵ For in depth discussion of the Virgin of Guadalupe see: Jeanette Favrot Peterson. 2014. *Visualizing Guadalupe: From Black Madonna to Queen of the Americas*. First edition. Austin: University of Texas Press.

devotional practices. Within this context their ex-voto traditions spread in similar ways from the Italian and Iberian peninsulas to New Spain.

The image of Guadalupe was initially gifted ex-votos by the indigenous population in the sixteenth century. After “conversion” the Spanish tried to control these native votive practices. Diane Fane and Fatima Bercht detail one account in “Votive Giving in the New World” relating that by threat of excommunication the indigenous population could not create candleholders in the shape of angels or use local tobacco—the problem not being the images themselves but their function.²⁵⁶ Food, wax and tobacco had been used as votives for their deities before the arrival of the Spanish. To avoid any form of non-Christian worship, Spanish authorities maintained that candles and incense had to come from Europe in order to be acceptable. Spanish-approved votive practices also included silver bodily parts and painted panel ex-votos.

²⁵⁶ Fane, Diane and Fatima Bercht. 2018. “Votive Giving in the New World” in *Agents of Faith : Votive Objects in Time and Place*. Edited by Ittai Weinryb. New York: Bard Graduate Center Gallery, 257. <https://doi.org/10.37862/aaeportal.00203>.



Fig. 5.6. Samuel Stradanus, *Indulgence for donation of alms towards the building of a Church to the Virgin of Guadalupe*, 1608. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image in the public domain: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/393327>

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Samuel Stradanus' engraving of Guadalupe documents examples of ex-votos left in thanks for miracles received (fig. 5.6). The Stradanus engraving documented devotion to the cult of Guadalupe in Mexico City by the criollo, or Spanish aristocrats born in New Spain. The image, reminiscent of the Venetian print of Saint Roch discussed in Chapter 1 (fig. 1.14), shows miracles happening to mostly criollos in eight lateral panels around the cult image. The cult image in the center is adorned with what are presumably silver ex-votos depicting bodily parts. Although not depicted in the Stradanus engraving, painted ex-votos were also made and dedicated predominately by Spanish or criollo devotees during this early time in the cult's inception. It was not until the nineteenth

century that a new form of votive painting began to emerge in Mexico, which was made more widely available to the general population.

The term *retablo* can refer to any religious painting on tin or scrap metal, but is often associated specifically with painted ex-votos from Mexico.²⁵⁷ It may be surmised that due to the affordability and availability of these materials, *retablos* became an increasingly popular form of votive giving during this time. They were often painted by artists who did not follow traditional European artistic training. As such, they began to proliferate as a new sign of Mexican artistic consciousness in the nineteenth century and continue to be produced as a treasured part of Mexican visual culture today.



Fig. 5.7. *Retablo* showing a woman healed from an illness by the Virgin of Guadalupe. Old Basilica of Guadalupe, Mexico City. Late nineteenth or early twentieth century.

²⁵⁷ See Gloria Fraser Giffords. 1992. *Mexican Folk Retablos*. Rev. ed. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press; and Elizabeth Netto Calil Zarur, and Charles M. Lovell. 2001. *Art and Faith in Mexico: The Nineteenth-Century Retablo Tradition*. 1st ed. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Ex-votos, not only made for the Virgin of Guadalupe, but also dedicated to other sainted figures, began to appear as *retablos*. Figure 5.7 is a typical example of a *retablo* dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe from the nineteenth or early twentieth century. The composition is reminiscent to that of Christofano's maiolica ex-voto discussed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation (fig. 2.10). A sick figure reclines in a bed, while the Virgin Mary appears in the upper corner of the composition, to aid the devotee in their time of crisis. Text at the bottom of the image explains details of the encounter. Although there are similarities between Christofano's ex-voto and the one depicted above, some important distinctions can be made. For one, Christofano's ex-voto is painted on maiolica ceramic, while the *retablo* seen here is painted on tin or some other type of scrap metal.

The materiality of *retablos* is important to consider. Cheap metal used in *retablos* was easily available to all classes in Mexico. It came to represent Mexican creative innovation and these types of paintings became linked to a national identity. Figure 5.8 can be found in the museum of the old Basilica of Guadalupe and demonstrates a connection between Guadalupe and national identity. It depicts two figures kneeling with lit candles, one with a child in their arms. The Virgin of Guadalupe is painted on the left and below is a description of thanks for saving the child from an illness. In the middle of the painting directly between the devotees and Guadalupe is written "Viva Mexico".



Fig. 5.8. *Retablo* created in thanks for healing a child from an illness by the Virgin of Guadalupe. Old Basilica of Guadalupe, Mexico City. Late nineteenth or early twentieth century.

One of the reasons the tradition of votive giving in relation to the Virgin of Guadalupe is meaningful is that it has evolved over time to reflect the different groups of people revering her. Like the Madonna dei Bagni, there are strong ties between the type of votive given and the identity of the devotee. With the Madonna dei Bagni, gifts of painted maiolica link community members to their specific land and ceramic trade. With devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe, the choice in votive given also reflects ties to the community these gifts came from, whether that be indigenous, criollo or Mexican national identity.

There are many similarities between the tradition of maiolica votive painting at the Madonna dei Bagni and that of Mexican *retablos*. Both are ex-voto paintings

that began to be produced in historical periods, and that continue to be a thriving part of cultural practice today. They both utilize a similar formulaic composition to display clear messages of hope and redemption. Yet, although these practices appear similar, they have important differences which must be explored.

Retablos in Mexico

Retablo production flourished in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was after the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) that they began to gain popularity in artistic circles in part thanks to their collection by artists Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera who decorated their home with them. *Retablos* were understood as authentically Mexican forms of painting. In 1921 they appeared in an exhibit on popular art in Mexico, and in 1922 Diego Rivera wrote a magazine article about them, further popularizing *retablos* as a truly authentic Mexican art form. By the mid-twentieth century, *retablos* started to become less common as votive offerings could often be given in a much simpler and more affordable media: photographs. This shift in *retablo* production also relates to the effects of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. As with churches in Italy, in Mexico votive objects were removed from altars and cult images which were to be kept tidy. It should come as no surprise that the Basilica of Guadalupe was held to a high standard in these reforms as the largest Catholic pilgrimage site in North and South America. *Retablos* do not decorate the current Basilica of Guadalupe, which was constructed in 1997. However, the old basilica, a museum located steps away, houses an array of votive objects, including hundreds of *retablos* lining the walls of

the former church (fig. 5.9). These ex-votos continue to be painted and left at the old basilica in thanks for miracles received from the Virgin of Guadalupe.



Fig. 5.9. Interior of the old Basilica of Guadalupe lined with *retablos*, Mexico City.

In her essay “*Les ex-voto au Mexique. De l'actualité de la production, de la fonction et de la diffusion de cet art populaire*”, Caroline Perrée discusses *retablos* in Mexico in the twenty-first century.²⁵⁸ Her findings show that they are no longer accepted in urban centers like the new Basilica of Guadalupe. However, she found that outside urban centers *retablos* continue to be made and dedicated for religious

²⁵⁸ Perrée, Caroline. 2006. “*Les ex-voto au Mexique. De l'actualité de la production, de la fonction et de la diffusion de cet art populaire*” in *Magazine Artension*, 30, 50-53.

purposes where Church authorities still accept the practice. Perrée spoke with *retablo*-makers known as *retableros* in Mexico City who related that people continue to commission the ex-votos even if they cannot be left in public religious shrines. These people will instead keep them in their homes. Because this type of creation has become valued as a manifestation of popular art from Mexico, art galleries and museums also request commissions. One artist in particular, Alfredo Vilchis Roque has become highly successful in creating these images for the art market.

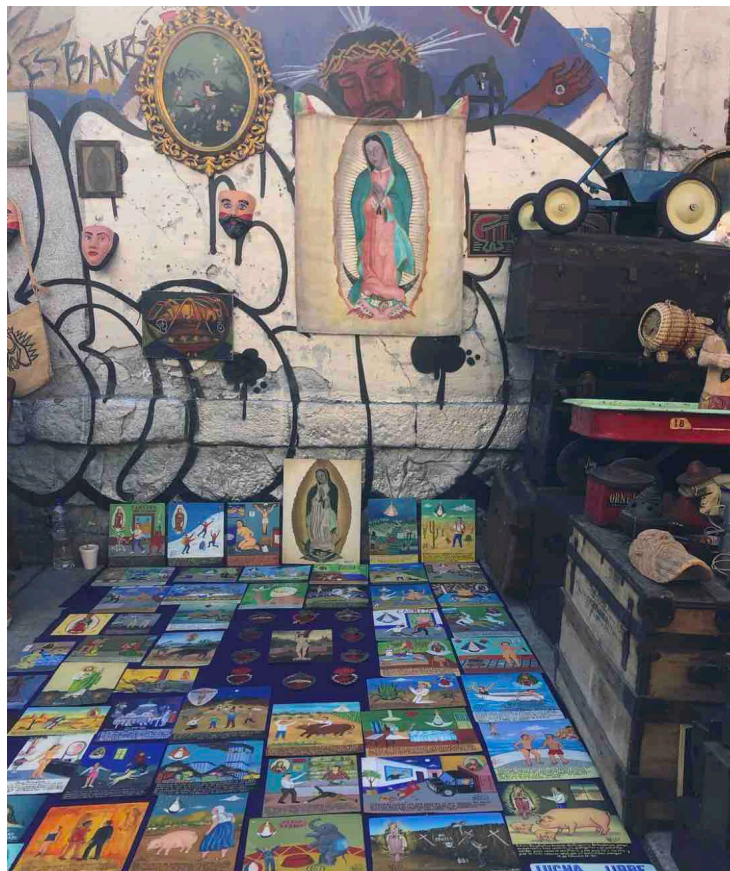


Fig. 5.10. Retablos by Alfredo Vilchis Roque and sons David and Luis sold at the La Lagunilla market in Mexico City, 2019.

Today Vilchis still sells his work along with his sons who emulate his style at the La Lagunilla market in Mexico City (fig. 5.10). In February 2019 I went to the market under advice from Perrée where I met several artists selling *retablos* created as souvenirs of Mexican art. I met with Vilchis and his sons David and Luis who told me that the designs they sell are based upon images clients have commissioned in the past. They change the names and information that would associate the original person with the image they sell. I asked them what topics they found most compelling. They mentioned those of the gay and lesbian community, who have a particularly hard time in Mexico.

Many of the images Vilchis and his sons create have content that would be hard to imagine the Church accepting on its walls. In this way the faithful have found a mode of personalized devotion in which they are allowed to explicitly say what they are thankful for: this may be thanks for gay marriage, the ability to escape an abusive partner, sex work, illegal immigration into the United States or any number of other stories. Today the originals made by Vilchis' family may not often be displayed publicly in churches, however the copies of these stories have become items in the art market as evocative depictions of the trials of contemporary life in Mexico. They have been exhibited in museums worldwide including the Louvre in Paris and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. While copies of historical ex-votos are made and sold as souvenirs in Deruta, the practice is not nearly as widespread as the sale of *retablos*

both in Mexico and abroad. Copies of ex-voto tiles from Deruta tend to be sold as decorative objects rather than art objects displayed in museums.²⁵⁹

Although separated by diverse time periods and cultural specificities, the Mexican *retablos* and Deruta tiles utilize some of the same visual language to articulate their messages. Both have a formulaic composition, with the sainted figure appearing to intervene in a scene of crisis for the devotee. However, Mexican *retablos* differ in terms of content. Because they are not always left permanently in a church context, *retablos* are able to express messages of gratitude and salvation for situations that might not be accepted as appropriate content by Church authorities. The Madonna dei Bagni, on the other hand, employs a series of checks before an ex-voto may be added to the church walls. A devotee must first ask permission from the caretakers, as well as the priest before commissioning the ex-voto from a local maiolica artist.

The artist as intermediary is an element in common for both Deruta maiolica ex-votos and Mexican *retablos* as well as likely the majority of painted ex-votos. In the publication *Infinitas Gracias*, contemporary *retablo* artist Alfredo Vilchis Roque explains his role: ““To be a *retablero* is not just any job. It is a very beautiful work, but very painful. It must be done with respect—not only for money. We are the messengers of people’s feelings”.²⁶⁰ Authors Victoire and Hervé di Rosa go on to

²⁵⁹ Although copies of historical maiolica ex-votos are made and sold in independent shops around Deruta, ex-voto artist Carmen Monotti was specifically commissioned by a restaurant chain in London to create a series of copies of ex-votos to decorate the walls of several London restaurants.

²⁶⁰ Vilchis Roque, Alfredo and Pierre Schwartz. 2004. *Infinitas Gracias: Contemporary Mexican Votive Painting*. San Francisco: Seuil Chronicle, 12.

explain: “The symbolic offering of the votive establishes a triangular relationship among the person making the offering, the artist, and the divinity. Vilchis (...) becomes the intermediary between devotee and deity, setting up the terms of exchange and reciprocity. It’s tit for tat—a miracle for a work of art, a painting to say “thank you.””²⁶¹ Acting as a third party, in the relationship between devoted and deity, the role of the artist as maker of ex-votos is akin to that of priestly confessor. The artist transcends the role of artisan into spiritual confidante.

While researching in Deruta, I was able to spend time with ex-voto artist, Carmen Monotti. In her shop, I witnessed many devotees stop by to check on the status of their ex-votos and to discuss the details of their images. She showed me various designs for ex-votos which she would create, the details of which were not always accepted by the devotees. Monotti was sure to depict the images exactly as requested by the individuals who came to her. This relationship between devotee and artist when creating ex-voto is described by Kate Wagle in her discussion of silver ex-votos made in Southern Italy: “The artisan and the devotee participate in an intense collaboration of craft and content. The craftperson’s skills are engaged on several levels: technical processes, knowledge of a codified catalog of references provided by traditional forms, and the interpersonal skills of a confidante, since the silversmith offers “his interested attention to the story” of his client. In this remarkable interaction “the devoted speaks of himself without reserve,” and the artisan and client

²⁶¹ Ibid.

are united in “solidarity and complicity”... The process is prolonged, with multiple visits to monitor progress and make changes. The artisan and patron cooperate to apply the silversmith’s expertise onto an object that manifests the devotee's deep spiritual response to a miraculous event.”²⁶²

In this way, the ex-voto artists, whether they be in Mexico or Italy, are elevated to interpreters of divine events. Their mediums possess the power to pass on stories of relationships with the divine for generations to come. Specifically in the case of the thefts at the Madonna dei Bagni, these artists preserved the memories which were stolen or broken as they faithfully recreated each tile in order for each memory to be preserved. The utilization of a third party in creating an ex-voto further links the community together. Religion is materialized via this exchange, further enhancing the community’s links between each other and the deity. This close dynamic links members of the community from the past to the present who are forever preserving their memories for the good of the community in the future.²⁶³

Final thoughts

Since I started my journey researching ex-votos, I have encountered a wide range of practices across many geographies. Apart from Roman Catholic ex-voto practices in Italy and Mexico which I have discussed at length here, I have witnessed many other

²⁶² Wagle, Kate. 1998. “Vernacular of the Sacred: Laminae Ex Voto in Southern Italy” in *Metalsmith*. Vol. 18., 31-32.

²⁶³ King, E. Frances. 2010. *Material Religion and Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203870334>, 57.

forms of votive giving. I have watched devotees light candles and leave dollar bills to the Virgin of Guadalupe at Pinto Lake Shrine at a city park in Watsonville, California. I have seen pilgrims stop at an unmarked doorway in Cusco, Peru to visit the secret site of Niño Compadrito, an unofficially sainted Inka mummy. The wonderful fragrance of a room full of flowers and unwrapped chocolates left as offerings filled the air as worshippers lit colorful candles and prayed in silence. I have watched pilgrims journey great distances to the Sanctuary of Chimayo in New Mexico to collect blessed dirt from a chapel and leave offerings of photographs and discarded crutches. I have also hiked up temple complexes in Japan and witnessed a vast array of devotional practices, from tying wishes to trees, leaving a written wish on an ema tablet, to dedicating a string of *senbazuru*—1,000 carefully hand-folded paper cranes—at these sacred sites. Despite geographic, religious and cultural differences, what these devotional practices have in common is that they are utilizing a physical object as an intermediary between our human world and the spiritual world. This type of human impulse to leave a gift with spiritual connotations transcends time and place. The endurance of votive practices across cultures and physical boundaries links humans across space and time together in gratefulness and hope. Each case of votive giving offers itself up for a unique understanding of the culture/religions involved. To my knowledge, the example of the Madonna dei Bagni is unique in its tradition of painted maiolica ex-votos cemented permanently in place. As such it gives us the opportunity to understand why medium is important, how it connects with the community, and how the permanence of ex-votos creates a

particular kind of timeful sacred space. Other devotional sites seem to be in constant flux: while new items are deposited, older ones are taken away. The Madonna dei Bagni shows us what it is like to witness a continuation of votive giving over the centuries in the same space the miracle-working object is revered. It enhances the memory of the community and the feelings of faith linked to the Madonna at the main altar. While many historical cults fade in votive devotion over time, the ex-voto practice at the Madonna dei Bagni has actually accelerated in recent years. This timeful space continues to invite visitors in to hope and pray for miracles in their own lives.

Epilogue: A note on positionality as a researcher of devotional practices

My interest in devotional practices is combined with a deep desire for experiential learning. As a result, my research has been a hands-on approach to understanding the material I so admire. Although I was raised Christian, I am not Catholic. As a researcher I have wandered into countless Catholic churches and taken the prescribed routes to enshrined objects and images. My curiosity as a scholar lead me to participate in the performance of religious ritual. This was unquestionably the case when I decided to take a month-long pilgrimage along the Camino de Santiago in northern Spain. During this physically and mentally challenging journey I lived as a pilgrim, was recognized by locals as a pilgrim, and indeed began to identify as a pilgrim myself. I walked a centuries-trodden path along with dozens of other pilgrims with whom I interacted daily. In this matrix, I became part of other's religious experiences just by the nature of being present in the space. The same can be said for any visit to a church, albeit on a much smaller scale.

As a scholar, I seek to respectfully observe the devotional practices I research. However, given the nature of this material, much of which must be seen in situ and experienced viscerally to be understood, there is often an overlap between observation and participation. When I visited the church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, I was made keenly aware of this overlap. Upon entering the structure, the visitor is faced with the stone of unction—the stone believed to be the place where Christ's body was laid after being taken off the cross. Rather than staring down at the

scene, I found myself respectfully kneeling among the devout to touch the cool pink stone. In that moment the woman next to me holding a bunch of rosaries spontaneously gifted me one which she had just touched to the stone. I gratefully and somewhat sheepishly accepted the kind gesture. I had entered her spiritual experience, one that she wished to share with me. I have found that to be a respectful observer, sometimes you also must respectfully participate in the devotional practices you are observing.

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