



***Saints, Miracles and the Image:  
Healing Saints and Miraculous Images in  
the Renaissance***

Sandra Cardarelli and Laura Fenelli, eds.

Andrea Kibler Maxwell

**Book Review**

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**About the Author**

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# ***Saints, Miracles and the Image: Healing Saints and Miraculous Images in the Renaissance***

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Writing about history is an act of fermentation. As pieces are added, other parts break down, agitation occurs, and new ideas rise. With time, some histories necessitate rewriting, retelling, and reanimating. In 1990, Hans Belting's *Likeness and Presence* (first published in Germany as *Bild und Kult*) established the year 1500 as the formative shift between images-as-cult and images-as-art, thus invoking the beginning of modernity. Over the following decades, anthropological ideas of agency and interaction between objects permeated the field, forcing scholars to rethink perceived truths. Subsequent art historical scholarship focusing on

the agency of miraculous images renewed the fermentation regarding early modern cult images. Belting's divide no longer sufficiently explains divine intercession through works of art, nor the agency cult images maintained well into so-called modernity.

Sandra Cardarelli and Laura Fenelli's edited volume *Saints, Miracles and the Image: Healing Saints and Miraculous Images in the Renaissance* joins the movement to rethink images as agents in the lives of the faithful. These thirteen essays, while diverse in topic and range, collectively provide insight into how miraculous images came in and out of favor in Renaissance Italy. The essays are arranged in chronological order, and each chapter fluidly moves between case studies, emphasizing questions of social history and religious beliefs that are useful to understanding the lives of these images.

To begin, Sheila Barker takes a broad view to explore historiography on the use of images to protect from or heal those infected by the plague in Italy from the sixth to the seventeenth century. She explains that while the origins of such uses remain unclear, an unexpectedly wide range of circumstances ushered certain images forward as apotropaic or supernatural in response to the plague epidemics that ravaged Italy for centuries; thus began a long history of active images and healing saints. As supplication or gratitude for image agency, the afflicted commonly left *ex votos* or offered the whole of their city through miniature representations of the town. Then, by focusing primarily on plague-related miracles, Vittoria Camelliti's essay explores how these secondary images that were offered as gifts to the divine visually disclose which saints were called upon to heal. *Ex votos* also provide visual evidence for the types of miracles the images were expected to have performed. Through these extant representations, Camelliti shows that the entire community was often implicated in a single votive offering for plague protection, though a singular, wealthy family often took visual prominence in the image—either through a coat-of-arms or as the individuals offering the city-model to the Virgin and/or Christ. As such, this research highlights the importance of donors to fund worthy visual offerings for the divine to gain their mercy.

The majority of the chapters in this volume use specific case studies to fill in the gaps of current research on miracles, images, and the saints involved. In many of these cases, the examples challenge previously assumed beliefs involving cult images. Following the ideas established by Belting, much of the research of the 1990s and early 2000s took for granted that the artists of miracle-working images prior to 1500 Italy were irrelevant—the cult was for the image and its connection to the divine; the rare exception was when the work was by St. Luke himself or a divinely completed *acheiropoieton*. After 1500, images received veneration for being works of art, receiving extra praise specifically because of the artist and technical skill involved. As evidence against these assumptions, Jessica Richardson uses her essay to describe instances in which miraculous images from Bologna gained fame through affiliation with certain artists, which in turn elevated the status of those artists. As such, she establishes that the relationship between miraculous image and artist did not exist in discrete categories on either side of 1500, but rather was a lengthy, additive process of associations and reputations across centuries.

Richardson's work propagates an important focus on reevaluating our understanding of image agency in the early modern period. Other chapters in this volume highlight often-neglected areas, including the identities, communities, and governments that formed around these works of art and the saints depicted. Gabriele Fattorini discusses an unusual instance in fifteenth-century-Siena, where the cult of Saint Peter of Alexandria developed not because of image agency or artist affiliation, but rather through a political party connection. After surviving a violent series of riots on Peter's feast day, the new regime adopted him as a civic saint and commissioned images in his honor. Despite being a celebrated saint of Siena, Peter of Alexandria's visual association with this political group proved stronger than his miraculous works or, indeed, the images of any artist. Once the family in power fell out of favor, images of the saint and his cult also ceased. While governments often played a role in the promotion of an image or saint, rarely were the cults contingent on that party's existence alone. Cults could be fashioned as propaganda for political or religious leaders of an area, but they also served the needs of the community beyond their governmental use. Valentina Živković explores how original and newly imported cults in Kotor blended to signify political union as well as strengthen protection against the plague. According to Stefano D'Ovidio, even images that had existed for centuries could suddenly gain a cult out of a need for propaganda and social control, as seen with the *Madonna Bruna del Carmine* in Naples. Other images could change the literal landscape and presence of churches and monasteries over time, as described by Alessia Meneghin in her essay on natural disasters in Polesine.

Several chapters explore how the Roman Church used cults and images to respond to the debates of the Protestant Reformation. The goal was to defend the Church and the continued existence of monasteries, prove the validity of miraculous events, the sacraments, and the ritual of the liturgy, and increase funds. Descriptions of miraculous images and the protection or healing they provided were recorded as evidence for these truths. Using previously unexplored material written by those cloistered in monasteries, Alessia Liroso found that nuns' chronicles served as proof that works of art divinely protected those in the monasteries, implying that God disagreed with Protestants and instead approved of the monasteries' existence. However, as Meghan Callahan notes in her essay, reformation propaganda was not the primary motivator for all miraculous images, saints, and cults in sixteenth-century Italy. She points to the convent of La Crocetta in Florence, where the miraculous images associated with Sister Domenica were intentionally kept private, and thus did not draw crowds of public worshippers—or their money.

In some cases, records describe the existence of a miraculous image or image of a miracle-working saint, but time has separated the work of art from its cult association. By exploring images of the Blessed Andrea Gallerani in Siena and Saints Cosmas and Damian at Gavorrano, respectively, Diana Norman and Sandra Cardarelli use their essays to demonstrate how intense provenance research can potentially identify some of these "missing" cult images and the saints they promoted. In contrast, other images were prolific and frequently copied, transposing both image and supernatural power from one work to the next. In their essays, Laura Fenelli and Marco Faini use many case studies from Naples, Spain, and the Marche to explore how copy, repetition, and ritual of both images and words function to heal and protect. Additionally, Fenelli's work raises the question of authenticity of copies and contact relics, and whether some miracles require the presence and power of the original image to be effective.

Between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, the nations of the Christian Church relied on saints and images to miraculously intervene during times of turmoil, be they plague, political, or personal crises. While not noted specifically in the title, all the case studies in this book remain in or tied to Italy; however, several authors make a much-needed shift away from the popular trifecta of Florence, Rome, and Venice to explore cult images and saints in places like Rovigo, Bologna, Naples, Venice-controlled Kotor, and the reach of some cults into Spain.

This edited volume provides a rich collection of material inspiring further research on a more interdisciplinary and geographically diverse scale. The authors carefully highlight the

various methodological dispositions toward agency and images that research can take and invite the next wave of scholars to follow into this territory using a variety of primary sources, as presented in these chapters. The use of individual monastery records, local town events, and even architectural topographies are avenues for further research in all corners of the early modern Christian world. Paratextual material, such as a rich bibliography and a thematically arranged index, make this a pleasure to read. Aside from a scattering of typos in the final chapter, this beautifully produced book features ninety-eight full color images, many of which span the entire page and are sure to delight lay-readers and scholars alike. The opening includes a map of Italy and a timeline by Matilde Grimaldi noting the cities and events discussed throughout the volume. This book will benefit those who are interested in the agency of images, plague culture, and early modern Italian cults of saints not directly related to the Holy Trinity.



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