



Art and Miracle in Renaissance Tuscany

Robert Maniura

Sarah Reiff Conell

Book Review

Robert Maniura, *Art and Miracle in Renaissance Tuscany*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 276 pp.; 59 b/w ills. Hardcover \$99.99. (9781108426848)

About the Author

Sarah Reiff Conell is a PhD candidate in the History of Art and Architecture Department at the University of Pittsburgh. She employs art-historical and digital methods to investigate late medieval and early modern cults of the Virgin Mary in the Danube River Valley. Her research traces the flow of miraculous agency through objects that participate in various forms of replication both within and across media.

Art and Miracle in Renaissance Tuscany

Robert Maniura

Sarah Reiff Conell

This engaging book by Robert Maniura represents the leading edge of scholarly discourse about miraculous agency. Throughout this study, the author draws upon a rich corpus of materials, taking into consideration tokens (badges and prints), paintings, votive offerings, books, and works of architecture as well as both personal and organizational records. Unpublished primary sources are represented in excerpts, brief transcriptions, and translations. Maniura's narrative is punctuated by elegant plans and maps (by Matilde Grimaldi) that emphasize the spatial context in which the actions that are central to this text's argument unfold.

Art and Miracle in Renaissance Tuscany revisits some case studies offered in limited form in Maniura's earlier essays, such as that of the Pratese lawyer, Giuliano di Francesco Guizzelmi. In this book, the author limits his scope to the "biographical timescale" demarcated by the life of Guizzelmi (1446–1518). The itinerant life of this lawyer offers a window into the personal draw of cults, acting as "a guide to the visual and devotional culture of his time" (8). Throughout this text, Maniura avoids arguments about historical beliefs, instead focusing on the behaviors of people and objects as components within a single structure, "an arena in which relationships, both sacred and social were generated and developed" (12). The first chapter introduces readers to the Guizzelmi family, including their particularly rich archival legacy. The family chapel is placed in the context of familiar art historical territory through comparison with other major monuments. Such examples illustrate the aspirations of the Guizzelmi and establish Guiliano as a figure particularly worthy of attention.

Before addressing Guiliano Guizzelmi's Marian devotion, Maniura devotes a chapter to presenting four examples of the lawyer's Christocentric devotional practice: his veneration of two miraculous crucifixes, the focus on Christ in the iconography of the painted program in the family's burial chapel, his membership in a confraternity that accentuated devotion to the Eucharist, and a vow to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem that remained unfulfilled on his death. This emphasis on Christ is a framework for understanding the later exploration of Marian devotion, likewise acting as a counter balance to potential misunderstanding about exclusivity in devotional allegiances.

Chapter three introduces Pratese Marian cults, which are the subject of much of Guizzelmi's writing and the primary focus of this book. Shrines are framed in context of community, simultaneously ecclesiastic and civic, represented by Guizzelmi in handwritten manuscripts that recount and update local miracles. These were not printed but rather lent out as a rearticulation of the cult and its continuity, incorporating stories from Guizzelmi's own lifetime. Maniura compellingly argues that devotion is in constant need of construction, and therefore cannot be passive. He likewise introduces the power of intermediary material tokens that combine resemblance and touch, facets that feature prominently in the miracles of the town's burgeoning image cult.

Chapter four establishes the cult of Santa Maria delle Carceri's origins, as a once marginal painting on a prison wall transformed into a devotional image worthy of a shrine. By tracing the early communal response, Maniura offers readers valuable insights into the political, architectural, and textual landscape in which Guizzelmi's actions emerged. Maniura argues that devotional acts were learned and highly social behaviors in which devotees relinquished control in their performance without guaranteed outcomes.

Chapter five delves further into the unique components of Guizzelmi's miracle book about Santa Maria delle Carceri. His narrative additions to the collection include claims of first- and second-person accounts of miraculous events, and shift from tales of highly localized miracles

to geographically distant intercessions that took place away from the shrine. In his reporting of these non-proximate instances, Guizzelmi emerges as a propagator of this new cult's dissemination, largely through the distribution of and advice concerning mediating material tokens. These prints and badges shared two key features; they were figured to resemble Santa Maria delle Carceri and had touched the painting. Maniura hones in on vows as fundamental and active rituals by leveraging this primary source as a rare, first-hand account of appropriate devotional behavior. Vows and votive offerings are explored in a full chapter as central components to a type of ritual action described as an "exchange of images" (139). The author lays out the many forms that representation can take and draws parallels to ritual behavior, arguing that "material gift and devotional performance are inextricable" (158). Drawing inspiration from gift giving, votive offerings are framed as performative and social acts, a process primarily articulated by images rather than words. As he puts it, "the painting actively constructs the relationship it shows" (166).

Chapter seven directly confronts the role of the visual in devotional practice. Maniura asserts that miracles of healing and intercession, which are often distant from the shrine itself, warrant more attention than miracles of transformation. He states that focusing on moments of transformation puts undue emphasis on the status of the miraculous image or the shrine itself. Maniura instead forefronts actions associated with the image, in part by drawing connections between miracles and magic. Images are central to ritual and act as "foci for constructive performances of devotion" (177). People, rather than divine forces, are the unmistakable actors in Maniura's system, as "the devotees themselves construct the miracle" (173). For the author, performance makes reality, and ritual is defined as a form of collective identity construction. He advocates for a diffused model of agency in miraculous cults, a move away from seeing cult chapels or their central objects as points of principal devotion. Maniura offers compelling evidence that "miraculous images are only one element of a rich devotional landscape" (9). Nevertheless, they were certainly objects that figured centrally in devotees' actions, and the author's description of these images highlights one of the fundamental contradictions in the study of miracle cults; it is difficult to understand why shrines were filled with valuable objects or why tokens that touched miraculous images were used in healing if it was, as he argues, "unlikely that they were taken to provide direct access to the divine" (9).

In his conclusion, the author employs terms like "framework," "diagram," and "system" while continuing to eschew notions of psychology or belief. The actions of a Pratese lawyer provide a valuable window into a single case, one that calls for further integration with actions of others and perhaps even the convictions that led people to put their faith in images. The persistent metaphor of networks might be useful in expanding the scope of this research without flattening out the particulars that make Maniura's scholarship exceptionally strong. Engaging with network theory may help expand and develop his exciting claim that "what makes sense of these phenomena is the network of action itself" (188).¹

This book is a treasure-trove of insights into devotional behaviors of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It is well-researched and makes visible a range of rich archives, from civic administrations to personal documents. The author weaves historiographical discourse with primary sources, canonical artworks, and lesser-known objects to render a masterful representation of devotion in Renaissance Tuscany. Each example is part of a narrative that leads the reader to a fuller understanding of the context in which Guizzelmi lived. Chapter six has particular pedagogical potential for unpacking the role of wax offerings in art history, while also providing a model of research for objects that no longer survive. Cambridge University Press has produced an attractive book with illustrations of nearly every object discussed, including a few images of pages within the primary sources themselves. With a relatively high

¹ There is much work to be done to realize the full potential of networks in art history, particularly in relation to questions of agency. For an introduction to the challenges and affordances of networks in history and archeology, see Tom Brughmans, Anna Collar, and Fiona Susan Coward, eds., *The Connected Past: Challenges to Network Studies in Archaeology and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

sticker price, it is unfortunate that color illustrations are only available online. Nevertheless, this captivating and wonderfully rich volume is a valuable resource for anyone invested in late medieval and early modern devotion.

 New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.



This journal is operated by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#), and is co-sponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).