The culture of the miraculous in Renaissance Italy

In Renaissance Italy, miracles were part of everyday life. The entire peninsula was peppered with shrines, at which images of the Virgin Mary or local saints were renowned for their miracle-working properties. The faithful came from near and far in order to leave votive offerings (painted wooden boards, wax anatomical models, crutches, clothes, grain, candles) in gratitude for cures and other miracles effected. Ex voto images testify to the full range of ‘graces’ received – from a child saved from a nasty incident involving a large pair of scissors to a prisoner escaped from gaol. In turn, they provide exceptional glimpses into the lives of families and communities.

The rise of print offered a new medium in which these miracles could be narrated, recorded and celebrated. The first collection of Marian miracles was published in Vicenza in 1475, and compilations of miracle stories and saints’ lives (which detailed miracles) were consistent best-sellers through the sixteenth century and beyond. Again, these narratives give us a unique vantage-point from which to view the experiences and preoccupations of Renaissance Italians. We learn, for example, of the woman falsely accused by her husband of adultery, whose reputation is saved when her one-month-old infant pipes up: ‘Father, please don’t make those accusations, for I am your child’. Or of the little boy who is rescued from the horrible fate of drowning in excrement when the Virgin Mary intervenes to secure his safe removal from the latrine into which he has fallen.
Meanwhile, we join merchants on their business trips and follow bandits into the lawless countryside. And we hear about the Jews and the Muslims who so often appear as the scapegoats in these providential tales.

This special subject presents an unfamiliar yet highly revealing aspect of Renaissance Italy via a rich array of texts (in translation) and images. The course will appeal to those who enjoy crossing disciplinary boundaries. Our study of paintings, objects, and buildings will involve a rigorous training in the interpretation of visual culture. The textual sources will call for sophisticated close reading and an engagement with the history of the book. Our interpretations of the varied evidence will be rooted in the social history of Renaissance Italy.

The course structure interweaves local case-studies with related themes. In each class, we shall consider a text or a body of material evidence from a particular shrine. Classes will be interactive from week one, and students will be asked to prepare presentations. The sources will be heavily weighted towards the visual and the material, including ex votos, altarpieces, narrative art, and buildings. All texts will be provided in translation.

For a taste of some of the sources that are central to this paper, watch the short video here.

Background reading

For those of you who have never studied the Italian Renaissance, you might find it useful to read one or more of the following introductory books: Guido Ruggiero, The Renaissance in Italy: A Social and Cultural History of the Rinascimento (2015); Virginia Cox, A Short History of the Italian Renaissance (2016); Evelyn Welch, Art in Renaissance Italy, 1350-1500 (2000); Stephen Campbell and Michael Cole, A New History of Italian Renaissance Art (2012).
Michaelmas Term

1. **Introduction: mapping miracles in Renaissance Italy.**
   Preparatory reading: Garnett and Rosser (chapter on Moodle). Plus watch video about the Volto Santo of Lucca (cf Cervelli):
   [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qsKGFYvbW8o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qsKGFYvbW8o)

2. **Lonigo, Tolentino, Madonna dell’Arco. The emergence of painted tablets and the iconography of the ex voto.** Freedberg (ch. 7), Jacobs (on Moodle), Weinryb (chs 3-5).


4. **Annunziata (Florence), Madonna delle Grazie (Mantua). Wax versus wood: the materials of votive culture.** Holmes (2009), Panzanelli, Didi-Huberman (online), Bynum (2011, esp. ch. 2), Laven and Chessa in Ivanič et al. (2019)

5. **History of Our Blessed Lady of Loreto. The culture of pilgrimage.** Torsellino, Biondo and Montaigne. Finucane, Walsham (2013), Williams (1999), Corry et al. (136-155). See also UL blog on an English recusant copy: [https://specialcollections.blog.lib.cam.ac.uk/?p=15246](https://specialcollections.blog.lib.cam.ac.uk/?p=15246)

6. **Saint Nicholas of Tolentino. Miracles and the politics of sanctity.** Katajala-Peltomaa, Gilbertson, Vauchez, Ditchfield (academia.edu).


8. **Methodologies Workshop – Visual Culture: Freedberg, Gell, Baxandall, W.J.T. Mitchell (on Moodle), Maniura and Sheperd, Garnett and Rosser.** NB: we shall meet in the Fitzwilliam Museum and discuss theory in relation to actual artworks from our period.

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Lent Term

9. **Social history of miracles. Gender, family, health, wealth, race, age.** Please pick and research a theme, using visual and verbal sources. You will be asked to give a short powerpoint presentation on your findings.
10. **Critiques, scepticism, controversy, change.** Justice (esp. 2008), Sacchetti, Erasmus, Munday, Soergel (2012, esp. ch. 2, ‘Luther on miracles’).

11. **Monte Berico (Vicenza). Plague, civic cults and state-sponsored miracles.** *Operetta molto devotissima novamēte in luce produtta.* Grubb (on devotional practices in the Veneto); Trexler (on Moodle) and Maniura (2004, 2005, on Tuscan cults).


15. **Coróna di sessanta tre Miracoli della nunziata di Firenze. Preserving miracles for posterity.** Laven (2016 – on Moodle); Matthews-Grieco on the Ferrini miracle book; Ciprini on the watercolour reproductions of the Viterbo painted tablets. The focus here is on issues of ephemerality, permanence, and memory, and on the relationship between written and material records.

16. **Methodologies Workshop – the ‘psychology’ of miracles in comparative context:** Please read one of the following case-studies in preparation for this class: Blackbourn, Brading, Carroll, Christian, Harris, Johnson, Maniura (*Our Lady of Czestochowa*, 2004), Ward.

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**Easter Term**

17. Revision

18. Revision

19. Revision

20. Revision
PRIMARY SOURCES:

Painted ex votos:

Ballarin, Andreina, ed., Museo di Monte Berico (Vicenza: Frati Servi di Maria, 1996)

Ciarrocchi, Arnoldo and Ermanno Mori, eds, Le tavolette votive italiane (Udine: Edizioni Doretti, 1960)


Giardino, Antonio Ermanno and Michele Rak, eds, Per Grazia Ricevuta: Le tavolette dipinte ex voto per la Madonna dell’Arco (Naples: Ci.esse.ti cooperativa editrice, 1983).


Venetian Plague-Churches:
Redentore
San Rocco
San Sebastiano

Altarpieces and predella panels:
Santa Fina altarpiece, San Gimignano, 1402
Gentile da Fabriano, San Nicola of Bari panels, 1425
St Margaret with stories from her life, by Turino Vanni (1349-1438).
Domenico Veneziano, Miracle of St Zenobius (Fitzwilliam), 1442-8
(All viewable on the internet and via Artstor)

Narrative cycle of the Miracles of the True Cross:
Vittore Carpaccio, Miracle of the Cross at the Ponte di Rialto, 1496
Gentile Bellini, Procession of the True Cross in Piazza San Marco, 1496
Gentile Bellini, Miracle of the Cross at the Bridge of S. Lorenzo, 1500
(All viewable on the internet and via Artstor)

Miracle texts:

Extracts (translated by MRL) from the following printed collections:
Marian miracles


Alberto da Castello, Rosario della gloriosa vergine Maria (Venice, 1522)

Bologna, San Luca

Leandro Alberti, Cronichetta della Gloriosa Madonna di San Luca, Del monte della Guardia, e de’ suoi Miracoli, dal suo principio infino all’Anno 1577. E dell’origine del Convento delle Venerande Monache di San Mattia. (Bologna, 1598)

Ferrara, Giovanni da Tossignano

La vita e miracoli del beato Johâni da Tossignano Vescovo di Ferrara dell’ordine de frati Jesuati di Sancto Hieronymo (Venice, 1512)

Florence, Annunziata

Luca Ferrini, Coronâ di sessanta tre Miracoli della nunziata di Firenze scritti à honore e reverenza di sessanta tre Anni, che visse la Beata Vergine in questo Mondo. (Florence, 1593)

NB: illustrations will be studied from 1593 edition.

Lonigo, Madonna dei Miracioli

Giovanni Domenico Bertani, Historia della gloriosa imagine della Madonna di Lonic (Verona, 1605)

Mantua, B. Giovannibuono


Tolentino, San Nicola

Vita gloriosissima et miracoli eccelsi del beato confessore santo Nicola di Tolentino, raccolta da gli antichi Originali
Ferrara, 1588)

Venice, True Cross

*Questi sono i miracoli dela santissima croce della scola di misier san zuane evangelista.*
(Venice, 1481)

*Miracoli della Croce Santissima. Della scuola de San Giovanni Evangelista.*
(Venice, 1590)

Vicenza, Monte Berico

(Venice, 1527).

**Accounts of shrines:**


Marin Sanudo il giovane, *De origine, situ et magistratibus urbis Venetae ovvero La città di Venetia (1493-1530)*, ed. By Angela Caracciolo Aricò (Milan: Istituto editoriale Cisalpino-La Goliardica, 1980); translated extracts on miraculous sites of Venice.Camtools


**Critiques of miracles:**


**ADDITIONAL PRIMARY SOURCES**


Pietro Casola, *Pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the year 1494*, ed. by Margaret Newett (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1907; available online).


‘The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe’; a series of early modern primary texts about gender: [http://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/series/OVIEME.html](http://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/series/OVIEME.html)
SECONDARY SOURCES


Baron, Sabrina et al., *Agent of change: print culture studies after Elizabeth L. Eisenstein* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007).


Biow, Douglas, *The Culture of Cleanliness in Renaissance Italy* (Cornell University Press, 2006).


Carroll, Michael, Veiled Threats: The Logic of Popular Catholicism in Italy (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 1996).


Cavallo, Sandra and Tessa Storey, Healthy Living in Late Renaissance Italy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).


Corry, Maya, Deborah Howard, and Mary Laven, eds, Madonnas and Miracles: The Holy Home in Renaissance Italy (London: Philip Wilson, 2017).


Gentilcore, David, Healers and Healing in Early Modern Italy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); esp. ch. 7.

Gentilcore, David, Medical Charlatanism in Early Modern Italy, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).


Hamling, Tara, ‘To see or not to see? The presence of religious imagery in the Protestant household’, *Art History*, 30:2 (2007), pp. 170-97.


See review by Mary Laven: [http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/2422](http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/2422)


Justice, Steven, ‘Did the Middle Ages believe in their Miracles?’, *Representations*, 103 (2008), pp. 1-29.


Martin, Jessica, and Alec Ryrie, eds, *Private and Domestic Devotion in Early Modern Britain* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012)


Morse, Margaret, 'The Arts of Domestic Devotion in Renaissance Italy: The Case of Venice' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Maryland, 2006)

Morse, Margaret, 'Creating Sacred Space: The Religious Visual Culture of the Casa in Renaissance Venice', *Renaissance Studies*, 21 (2007), 151-84

Morse, Margaret, 'The Venetian portego: Family Piety and Public Prestige', in *The Early Modern Domestic Interior, 1400-1700: Objects, Spaces, Domesticities*, ed. by Erin J. Campbell, Stephanie R. Miller and Elizabeth Carroll Consavari (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 89-106


Quiviger, F. *The Sensory World of Italian Renaissance Art* (London, 2010)


Richardson, Brian, *Print Culture in Renaissance Italy: The Editor and the Vernacular Text, 1470-1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014)


Ruggiero, Guido, *Machiavelli in Love: Sex, Self and Society in Renaissance Italy* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 2007)


Scribner, Robert, *For the sake of simple folk* (Cambridge, 1981)


