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Society

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Department of History of Art

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# From the Editor

In this Coronation year we look at Sir Joshua Reynolds, an artist appointed as King's Painter to an earlier monarch, and who painted many court portraits of King George III and Queen Charlotte. Kate Retford celebrates his career in this – the tercentenary – year of his birth and assesses his role in elevating the status of art and artists in the eighteenth century.

John McNeill writes on the conquest of southern Italy by the Normans in the eleventh century and the impact they had on the art and architecture in the region.

Visitors to Lucca will have seen and admired the work of the fifteenth-century Lucchese sculptor Matteo Civitali; Geoffrey Nuttall discusses his monuments in Lucca Cathedral.

Ursula Weekes looks at the invention of printmaking in the fifteenth century and the impact on the scope and nature of knowledge of the wider distribution of prints.

The winner of this year's London Art History Society Prize for Best Modern Period Masters Dissertation at Birkbeck, Lisa Thefaut, shows the influence on Gwen John's work of her conversion to Catholicism.

I would like to express my gratitude to Patricia Braun, who has retired from the panel, for her invaluable contribution to the *Review*, and to welcome two new members, Margaret Kirkby and John Owens. My thanks to the contributors, our designer, and my fellow panel members.

**Barrie MacDonald**
*Editor, London Art History Society Review*

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**FRONT COVER:** *Joshua Reynolds,* Mrs Musters as Hebe*, 1782. Oil on canvas, 238.8 x 144.8 cm. Kenwood, Iveagh Bequest (English Heritage).*

# Sir Joshua Reynolds: elevating art

Kate Retford

*Fig. 1: Joshua Reynolds,* Joshua Reynolds*, c. 1747-9. Oil on canvas, 63.5 x 74.3 cm. National Portrait Gallery, London.*

The visionary artist and poet William Blake loathed Sir Joshua Reynolds, famously declaring: 'This Man was Hired to *Depress* Art'.[1] The irony of Blake's choice of word here is that Reynolds himself was consistently preoccupied with the drive to elevate art, the status of artists – and himself. His success in this enterprise was remarkable. In 1768, Reynolds became first President of the newly founded Royal Academy in London and was knighted the following year. In 1773, he was made Mayor of Plympton and awarded a Doctorate of Civil Law from Oxford. And, in 1784, even though George III and Queen Charlotte loathed Reynolds, apparently calling him 'poison in their sight', he was given the post of King's Painter.[2]

Joshua Reynolds was born three hundred years ago, in the summer of 1723 in Plympton in Devon. His origins were respectable but fairly modest, as the son of a schoolteacher and cleric. He was concerned, however, with the business of self-improvement from an early age. A carefully ruled commonplace book which Reynolds kept through the 1730s is full of 'Extracts' from the books which he'd been reading. Amongst quotes from Plutarch, Ovid and Shakespeare, we find transcriptions of the openings and closings of letters: evidence of Reynolds learning elegant forms of correspondence. He also copied out material from books on politeness: 'Nothing is more important in the commerce of life than to please in Conversation.' [3]

An apprenticeship in London in the 1740s with the portraitist Thomas Hudson was followed by a three-year trip to Italy to learn from the antique and the Renaissance, setting the ambitious young artist firmly on his way. Just before Reynolds set off for the continent, he painted one of the many self-portraits he was to execute over the course of his career – and arguably the most striking (Fig. 1). Shielding his eyes with one hand, he directly meets our

gaze, lips slightly parted. The effect of the dramatic chiaroscuro on his face adds considerably to the animation of his pose. Informally dressed in a frock coat, he grasps his brushes, mahlstick and palette with palpable energy, the latter casting its own shadow onto the canvas behind.

This was the one and only time that Reynolds would paint himself as a practising artist. In every other (securely attributed) self-portrait, he shows himself rather as a sociable gentleman or a learned scholar. With his artistic credentials well established, Reynolds set about the business of elevating art - and that meant emphasising the mind over the hand. In 1771, he opined: 'The value and rank of every art is in proportion to the mental labour employed in it, or the mental pleasure produced by it. As this principle is observed or neglected, our profession becomes either a liberal art, or a mechanical trade.'[4] This quote is from one of Reynolds's *Discourses on Art*, delivered to students and colleagues at the Royal Academy between 1769 and 1790. Through these lectures, he promoted core academic precepts: art as an intellectual endeavour; the need to prioritise ideas over detailed depiction; the importance of addressing the elite rather than the multitude; and the need to establish a British school of history painting.

However, Reynolds didn't always practise what he preached. For one thing, he did very little himself in the way of history painting at all. Ending his final *Discourse* with a eulogy to Michelangelo, he observed: 'I have taken another course, one more suited to my abilities and to the taste of the times in which I live.'[5] Reynolds's abilities were, undoubtedly, most well suited to portraiture, the genre of art in which he specialised throughout his career.[6] And this genre was very much 'to the taste of the times'. Portraits dominated the Academy exhibitions every year, with audiences clamouring to see likenesses of the great, the good, and the not-so good.[7]

Portraits were also the only reliable source of income for a painter, and Reynolds earned a fortune. By the 1780s, he was charging £200 for a full length portrait (worth around £28,500 at the time of writing).[8] Given how hard Reynolds worked, and how prolific he was, it is not surprising that he ended up a very wealthy man indeed. But these portraits also secured him fame, not least thanks to his engagement with the thriving international print market. Reynolds was quick to realise the potential of mezzotint for the dissemination of his work, with its velvety tones and ability to capture effects of light and shade, and he collaborated closely with specialists in this medium.[9] One good example is his 1760 portrait of the writer Laurence Sterne. Only a couple of months after publishing the first two volumes of his celebrated novel, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, Sterne was sitting to Reynolds in London. The resultant picture was then immediately passed onto the printmaker Edward Fisher, and both painting and mezzotint were exhibited the following year, capitalising on the author's celebrity (Fig. 2). The success of Reynolds's work in print form was such that the engraver Robert Strange later remarked: 'I know no painter, the remembrance of whose works will depend more on the art of engraving than that of Sir Joshua Reynolds.'[10]

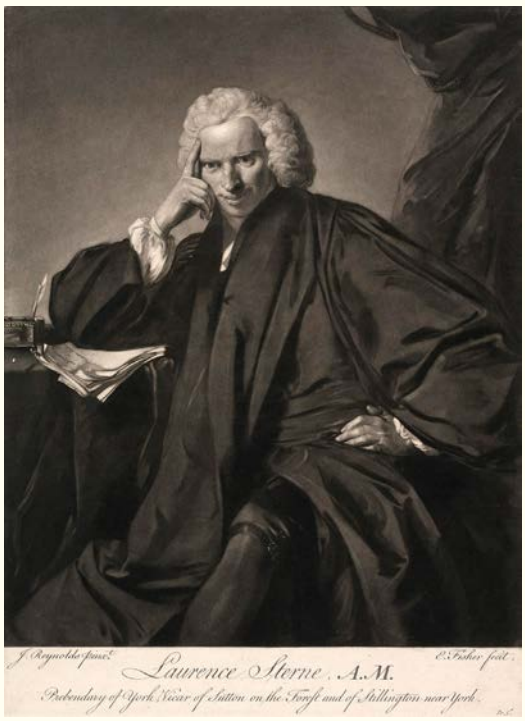


*Fig. 2: Edward Fisher after Joshua Reynolds,* Laurence Sterne*, 1760. Mezzotint, 37.8 x 27.5 cm. National Portrait Gallery, London.*

Male portraits like that of Sterne required rooting in profession, or in title and position. The author is shown here in his black clerical garb, one finger pointing to his brilliantly illuminated temple and thereby the mind which has produced the novel beneath his elbow. But Reynolds could be much more creative with his female portraits. It was here that he could make use of mythological or allegorical allusion,

*Fig. 3: Joshua Reynolds,* Diana disarming Cupid: Elizabeth Dashwood, Duchess of Manchester and her son, George Montagu, Viscount Manderville*, exh. 1769. Oil on canvas, 213.4 x 151.1 cm. Wimpole, Cambridgeshire (National Trust).*

transporting sitters to a timeless realm of classicism, and thereby bring the modest genre of portraiture closer to the hallowed domain of history painting.[11] From 1760 onwards, Reynolds depicted numerous women in loose flowing drapes, usually posed in landscapes, often including flattering references to goddesses and muses. One of his exhibits in the first Royal Academy exhibition, for example, was a portrait of the Duchess of Manchester and her son, 'in the guise of Diana disarming love' (Fig. 3). Elizabeth Dashwood, in a long classical gown, the goddess's crescent moon in her hair, bends to steal Cupid's bow, thinking him asleep. *The St James's Chronicle* approvingly opined that such paintings had 'attracted the attention of the connoisseurs', but Horace Walpole was unimpressed: 'bad attitude'.[12] However, that 'attitude' had been lifted wholesale from an engraving after Francesco Albani's *Diana and her Nymphs disarming Cupids*.[13] Reynolds was a notable enthusiast for 'borrowing a particular thought, an action, attitude, or figure, and transplanting it into your own work', as a 'perpetual exercise of the mind, a continual invention'.[14] For his critics, however, it was plagiarism, pure and simple.

Reynolds's extraordinary portrait of *Mrs Musters as Hebe* at Kenwood, painted in 1782, represents the apogee of his drive to 'raise and ennoble' portraits 'far above their natural rank' (Front Cover).[15] Sophia Musters had been deemed 'the reigning toast of the season' in London a few years previously.[16] However, she does not here wear the fashions she would have worn amongst the *bon ton*, but instead a long flowing pink gown and gauzy scarf, her hair natural and dishevelled. In fact, she is not even on this earth. Resting one delicately sandalled foot on Mount Olympus, Sophia is Hebe, Goddess of Youth and Cupbearer to the Gods, pouring nectar into the cup of Jupiter's eagle. This is a superlative exercise in Reynolds's project to lift himself above 'the cold painter of portraits', providing a highly flattering likeness, whilst also creating a grand mythological painting.[17]

Reynolds's portrait practice was interwoven with a full social life, packed with dinners and clubs. Helped by his early study of the art of politeness, he was able to move in the same elevated circles as those whom he painted. His student James Northcote later noted that, 'though the frequent dining-out probably shortened his life, it was of great advantage to him in his profession.'[18] Reynolds was less *complaisant* towards his pupils, however, and poor Northcote had to work in a storage room in Reynolds's grand house in Leicester Fields.[19] This was situated in the expensive extension which contained the artist's octagonal painting room and the gallery where he displayed both his own work and his collection of old masters: an environment in which genteel society could feel comfortable.[20] Reynolds's

*Fig. 4: Joshua Reynolds,* Joshua Reynolds*, c. 1775. Oil on canvas, 71.5 x 58 cm. Uffizi Gallery, Florence.*

success was further paraded on the streets of London, in the form of the splendid carriage in which he would make his sister ride, as he was too busy. As Northcote recounted: 'a crowd would collect to stare at the carriage, and ask whose it was. Now this was just what Sir Joshua wanted!'[21]

The early self-portrait which Reynolds painted before his trip to Italy may be the most engaging, but it is the image disseminated in later works, such as that painted for the Grand Duke of Tuscany's gallery of self-portraits in 1775, which is much more familiar (Fig. 4). On a label on the back of this canvas, Reynolds provided the full list of his honours and titles in Latin. The frock coat is gone, in deference to the robes and hat signifying his honorary degree. The tools of his trade are nowhere to be seen: he instead grasps a sheaf of drawings by Michelangelo, inscribed 'Disegni del Divino'. When Reynolds came to deliver that final Discourse at the Royal Academy, on his retirement in 1790, he informed his audience, 'however unequal I feel myself to that attempt, were I now to begin the world again, I would tread in the steps of that great master: to kiss the hem of his garment, to catch the slightest of his perfections, would be glory and distinction enough for an ambitious man.'[22] Considering the considerable wealth and spectacular social and professional success Reynolds had earned as a portraitist, it seems a dubious claim.

**Kate Retford** *is Professor of History of Art at Birkbeck, University of London. She has published widely on eighteenth-century British art, particularly on gender, portraiture and the country house. Her recent publications include* The conversation piece: making modern art in eighteenth-century Britain *(London: Yale University Press, 2017) and* The Georgian London town house: building, collecting and display*, co-edited with Susanna Avery-Quash (London: Bloomsbury, 2019). She is currently working on a book about print rooms in eighteenth-century country houses.*

## Notes

1 My italics. Inscribed on the title page of Blake's copy of *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds, Knight*: British Library, C.45.e.18-20. Image available at: https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-works-of-sir-joshua-reynolds-with-william-blakes-manuscript-notes.

2 Quoted in Richard Wendorf, *Sir Joshua Reynolds: the painter in society* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 1996), p. 175.

3 Yale Center for British Art: MS Reynolds 33. See Wendorf, *Sir Joshua Reynolds*, pp. 32-4.

4 Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, (ed.) Robert R. Wark (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), *Discourse IV* (1771), p. 57.

5 Reynolds, *Discourses*, XV (1790), p. 282.

6 See Mark Hallett, *Reynolds: portraiture in action* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014). For the full catalogue raisonné, see David Mannings and Martin Postle, *Sir Joshua Reynolds: a complete catalogue of his paintings*, 2 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).

7 Marcia Pointon, 'Portrait! Portrait!! Portrait!!!', in D.H. Solkin, (ed.), *Art on the line: the Royal Academy exhibitions at Somerset House, 1780-1836* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 93-109.

8 https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator: sum given for January 2023.

9 Tim Clayton, '"Figures of Fame": Reynolds and the Printed Image', in Martin Postle (ed.), *Joshua Reynolds: the creation of celebrity* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), pp. 49-60.

10 Robert Strange, *An Inquiry into the Rise and Establishment of the Royal Academy of Arts* (London, 1775), p. 121.

11 Gill Perry, 'Women in disguise: likeness, the Grand Style and the conventions of feminine portraiture in the work of Sir Joshua Reynolds', in Gill Perry and Michael Rossington, (eds.), *Femininity and masculinity in eighteenth-century art and culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 18-40.

12 Quoted in Nicolas Penny, (ed.), *Reynolds* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), p. 240.

13 See John Newman, 'Reynolds and Hone: The Conjuror Unmasked', in Penny, *Reynolds*, pp. 344–54, at p. 346. Nathaniel Hone included this print amongst the sources he identified for a number of Reynolds's paintings, in his Conjurer, 1775, now in the National Gallery of Ireland: http://onlinecollection.nationalgallery.ie/objects/3257.

14 Reynolds, *Discourses*, VI (1774), pp. 106-7.

15 Reynolds, *Discourses*, III (1770), p. 52.

16 Charlotte Barrett, (ed.), *The Diary and Letters of Madame d'Arblay*, 6 vols. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1904), I, p. 283.

17 Reynolds, *Discourses*, III (1770), p. 52.

18 Ernest Fletcher, *Conversations of James Northcote, R. A. with James Ward, on art and artists* (London: Methuen & Co. 1901), p. 186.

19 Wendorf, *Sir Joshua Reynolds*, p.113.

20 Donato Esposito, 'Artist in Residence: Joshua Reynolds at No. 47, Leicester Fields', in Susanna Avery-Quash and Kate Retford, (eds.), *The Georgian London town house: building, collecting and display* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), pp. 191-210.

21 Fletcher, *Conversations*, p. 204.

22 Reynolds, *Discourses*, XV (1790), p. 282.

# The Normans in southern Italy

John McNeill

The Norman conquest of southern Italy was one of the more remarkable episodes of medieval history. Whereas England was subjugated by a sizeable and highly organised Norman army, southern Italy was largely won by small bands of soldiers of fortune.[1] Normans may have been involved in the defence of Salerno against Muslim raids c. 1000, and Norman mercenaries certainly played a part in the attack on the Byzantine administration in Bari in 1017, but it was not until the 1030s and 1040s that significant numbers of Normans arrived in the south. Two families in particular rose to prominence and demonstrated the Normans were capable of exercising territorial control. These were the Drengots, who were initially granted a county based on Aversa in return for defending the Duke of Naples against the Princes of Capua (Fig. 1); and the Hautevilles, who carved out a dominion in northern Basilicata centred on Melfi and Venosa. Both attracted supporters, and as news flowed back to Normandy, interest in southern Italy increased. Throughout the 1040s one can find evidence of Normans setting out on the journey south, many of them pushed as much as pulled given the aggressive curbs placed upon the freedoms enjoyed by the barons of western Normandy by the young Duke William (the future William the Conqueror). Indeed, by 1053, the instability in southern Italy caused by these migrations was sufficiently worrying for the papacy and Emperor Henry III to enter into a coalition with the Byzantines to raise an army with which to take on the Normans. Battle was joined at Civitate in northern Apulia on 17 June, resulting in a comprehensive defeat for the Roman-German-Byzantine coalition. Pope Leo IX was even taken prisoner. Civitate was unexpectedly violent and decisive – a massacre. The appearance of a coalition army in Apulia had forced the Normans to unite and in so far as their battle strategy was so brilliantly and ruthlessly executed, it shattered the confidence of the pre-existing political powers in the south.

It took time for the implications of Civitate to sink in, and while the Lombards in Campania, the Byzantines along the Adriatic and the papacy in Rome pondered this, the Normans extended their reach into Calabria and central Apulia. By 1058, when Richard Drengot toppled the Lombard Prince of Capua, things were looking dire. It was Pope Nicholas II who realised that the Normans could neither be defeated nor dislodged. If policy had to change, papal interests would best be served by cutting ties with the old hastily-organised coalition and befriending the Normans. The prize for the papacy was that the Normans might help re-establish the Latin church in areas which for centuries had been under Greek control, and expel the Muslims from Sicily. Thus, in 1059, Nicholas recognised Richard as Prince of Capua and travelled to Melfi to invest Robert Guiscard (an Hauteville) with the title Duke of Apulia, receiving an oath of fidelity in return.

Things moved rapidly thereafter. The conquest of Calabria was largely complete by the winter of 1059, and in 1061 Guiscard and his younger brother, Roger, launched the invasion of Sicily. Most of Apulia was conquered over the late 1060s. Bari fell in 1071, Palermo in 1072, Salerno in 1076. Although lordship in the borderlands of northern Apulia and the Abruzzo continued to be contested until the end of the eleventh century, and the conquest of Sicily was not completed until 1091, the Normans were in effective control of southern Italy by the time Robert Guiscard died in 1085. That the narrative of conquest ordinarily stops here is a fiction conferred by later administrative stasis. Guiscard and his brother, Roger, Count of Sicily, were intent on extending Norman dominion – Guiscard having invaded Greece and Roger occupying Malta – but both initiatives proved ephemeral. The disparate lands of southern Italy that had been conquered and brought together by the Normans, by contrast, endured as a kingdom until the Italian *Risorgimento* of the 19th century.

*Fig. 1: Marble relief of c. 1080-90, possibly from a portal at Aversa Cathedral, Campania, and now in the Cathedral museum. The relief shows a semi-naked Norman knight driving a sword into a twisting and exotic dragon. The dragon is based on Middle-Eastern textile designs, while the knight is unmistakably Norman. The relief might have been intended to depict a Norse hero, such as Sigurd. Photograph: John McNeill.*

*Fig. 2: Nave interior of Gerace Cathedral, Calabria. Photograph: John McNeill.*

If the Normans had effected lasting political change, how did this feed into the types of art and architecture created between the middle of the eleventh century and the end of the twelfth? Is an underlying *Normanitas* discernible in the adjustments made on the assumption of power, or were conditions on the ground so very different in Normandy and southern Italy – even within southern Italy – that there is little commonality to Norman experience across eleventh- and twelfth-century Europe? This is a question which has begun to receive a lot of academic attention: 2023 sees two exhibitions under the umbrella title 'Norman Connections' devoted to the subject – *Die Normannen* in Mannheim and *Normands: Migrants, conquérants, innovateurs* in Rouen, while the Haskins Society held a three-day international conference in Oxford on the 'Normans in the South' in 2017.[2]

There are no easy answers here, though the question has taken an interesting turn as a result of recent archaeological analyses of late eleventh-century buildings in Sicily and Basilicata. Given the reorganisation of the diocesan structure in Sicily and inland southern Italy, a building boom clearly gets under way over the last quarter of the eleventh century. This is mostly, though not entirely, the result of Norman patronage. The types of building one finds along the Mediterranean seaboard, however – in Campania and Calabria – are largely indistinguishable from the types of churches favoured in Rome, or the types of churches that had been commissioned by the Lombard predecessors of the Normans – namely lightweight, wooden-roofed basilicas with reused Roman columns and extensive areas of wall which are left available for painting. Gerace Cathedral in southern Calabria is a majestic example (Fig. 2).[3] Though much altered in the seventeenth century, Salerno Cathedral would have been similar.

The situation in the Hauteville heartlands of northern Basilicata was very different. Sparsely populated, with a largely indigenous Latin population but few monastic foundations, Basilicata is more of a *tabula rasa*. Of the three churches known to have been built with ambulatories and radiating chapels in southern Italy, two are in Basilicata – at Venosa and Acerenza – and both were built to plans which are almost identical. The better known is the famously unfinished new monastic church at Venosa (Fig. 3). Locals simply call it *l'incompiuta* – the uncompleted one. It was intended to form part of the monastery in which Robert Guiscard had several of his brothers laid to rest and where he himself was buried in 1085. Although one can argue its date, there is very strong evidence it was begun in the 1080s. Unlike Gerace, Venosa is not a church which would have been built in the way it was unless it was built by and for Normans. The specific layouts adopted in the ambulatories at Venosa and Acerenza are only paralleled in north-western Europe, and they are specifically related to St Peter's, Gloucester (now Gloucester Cathedral), a church begun in 1089.[4] Given the limited direct traffic between Basilicata and the Severn Valley in the late eleventh century, it is far more likely that all three are derived from a lost prototype in southern or western Normandy than that they are directly related. In this case it was probably the absence of a viable local architectural tradition coupled with a powerful network

*Fig. 3: View of the unfinished presbytery of the Abbey of the Santissima Trinità at Venosa, Basilicata. Photograph: John McNeill.*

of first-generation Norman patrons concerned to continue the patronage of religious institutions that led to the importation of Norman plans. It was necessary to draw in expertise from outside.

Apulia is different again. The coastal ports were populous, wealthy, and predominantly Greek speaking. Otranto, Brindisi, Bari and Trani were capable of supporting and sustaining a skilled workforce, and it is difficult to discern a notable shift in architectural style and practice between c. 1030 and c. 1080. The great change here occurs with the arrival of the relics of Saint Nicholas at Bari in May 1087, and the building of a new shrine church on the seafront to house them.[5] This new pilgrimage church was built with a richly decorated hall crypt supported on a forest of reused marble columns (Fig. 4), a grand transept in the manner of a Constantinian basilica in Rome and a three-storey elevation with a gallery. The gallery sits outside the otherwise Antique repertoire and, as with the sculpture of the north nave portal (which possibly depicts a scene from an Arthurian *chanson de geste*), may reflect a Norman taste. Apulian Romanesque changes direction around this period, and throws out a series of inventive and highly differentiated buildings which must, in part at least, reflect exposure to new artistic models and new patronal demands.

Finally, it is difficult to discuss Sicily in the same terms as above. This is partly because the inherited political situation in Sicily is unlike that of the mainland – with Muslim city states, a marginalised Greek church and a Latin diocesan system that had ceased to function two hundred years before the Normans arrived; and partly because far less survives from the late eleventh century, in contrast to the wealth of material that was created in the twelfth century, particularly in Palermo and its hinterland. Nonetheless, it is unquestionably the case that the visual culture that emerged in Sicily after Roger II was crowned king in 1130 drew on a range of

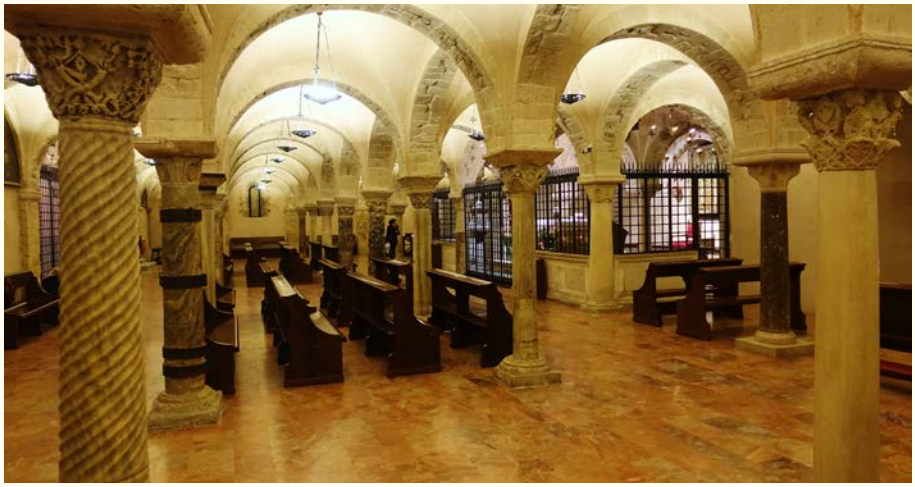

*Fig. 4: Crypt at San Nicola, Bari (looking north), Apulia. Photograph: John McNeill.*

*Fig. 5: Mosaics and muqarnas ceiling (north-west corner), Capella Palatina, Palermo, Sicily. Photograph: John McNeill.*

resources that are not found on the mainland, that it was fabulously well-financed, and that it was capable of bringing together Islamic, Greek and Roman modes of design.[6] Great claims have been made for this, that the art of mid-twelfth-century Palermo – particularly as found in the Capella Palatina – was more than the sum of its parts and developed a fully Mediterranean artistic language. I think that last is questionable. The Capella Palatina shows many signs of carrying within itself a sophisticated political agenda in the pursuit of which artists with different backgrounds were brought together. It is particularly evident in the layering of materials and artistic traditions – an Islamic muqarnas ceiling above Greek mosaics above Roman spolia columns and pavements (Fig. 5). The promise of a cosmopolitan art is there, though there is less evidence for a sustained follow-through beyond Palermo and its immediate surroundings, and without that the case for the seeds of a Mediterranean art having been sown in Norman Sicily is weakened. All that could change, however, as further discoveries are made in this current golden age of interest in Norman southern Italy.

**John McNeill** *lectures for the Department of Continuing Education at Oxford University and is a Vice-President of the London Art History Society. He is Secretary of the British Archaeological Association, for which he has edited and contributed to volumes on Anjou, King's Lynn and the Fens, English medieval cloisters, chantries, and Romanesque material culture. He is leading a study day on the Normans in Southern Italy on 22/23 November 2023 for the London Art History Society.*

## Notes

1 For a good account of the conquest, see G. A. Loud, *The age of Robert Guiscard* (Harlow: Longman, 2000). For a general overview, see Donald Matthew, *The Norman Kingdom of Sicily* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

2 Several papers from this conference were published as *Designing Norman Sicily*, Emily Winkler, Liam Fitzgerald and Andrew Small (eds.), (Boydell, 2020).

3 Salvatore Gemelli, (ed.), *La cattedrale di Gerace* (Cosenza, 1986).

4 Rosa Maria Bacile, John McNeill, and Clare Vernon, 'Venosa, Acerenza and 'Norman' Architecture in Southern Italy', in *Arte Medievale*, 4th series, 11 (2021), pp. 27-58.

5 Clare Vernon, *From Byzantine to Norman Italy: Mediterranean art and architecture in Medieval Bari* (London: I.B. Tauris/Bloomsbury, 2023).

6 See, in particular, William Tronzo, *The cultures of his kingdom: Roger II and the Capella Palatina in Palermo* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

# Matteo Civitali and the south transept of Lucca Cathedral: a closer look

Geoffrey Nuttall

Born in 1436, and as extraordinarily versatile an artist as his more famous Florentine contemporary Andrea del Verrocchio, Matteo Civitali – architect, sculptor in marble, wood and clay, goldsmith, painter and print maker – dominated artistic production in his native Lucca throughout the last quarter of the fifteenth century. Nowhere is this more evident than in the south transept of San Martino, the cathedral of Lucca, where he created one of the most beautiful, and materially and stylistically harmonious ensemble of Renaissance sculpture anywhere in Italy.

Its primary elements are three monuments of white Carrara marble made by Civitali and his workshop between 1467 and 1486. The first, *The Tomb of Pietro da Noceto*, completed in 1472 (Fig. 1), can be seen as Civitali's homage to the Florentine masters in whose workshops he probably trained in the 1450s and early 1460s: Desiderio da Settignano, Bernardo and Antonio Rossellino, and Mino da Fiesole. Modelled on the austere grandeur of Bernardo Rossellino's *Tomb of Leonardo Bruni* in the church of Santa Croce in Florence, it was executed with skill and delicacy equal to Desiderio's *Tomb of Carlo Marsuppini* in the same church, and incorporating elements of Antonio Rossellino's *Tomb of the Cardinal of Portugal* at San Miniato al Monte. In the Noceto monument Civitali achieved so fluent a synthesis of Florentine themes that in *The Lives of the Artists* Vasari attributed it to Michelozzo and Pagno di Lapo Portigiani, despite the inscription on the base of the sarcophagus '*Opus Matteo Civitali*.' Civitali was not an unimaginative imitator, however. His substitution

*Fig. 1: Matteo Civitali,* The Tomb of Pietro da Noceto*, c. 1467-1472. Carrara marble and red marble from the Garfagnana with traces of gold leaf and azurite, 740 x 350.6 x 41.5 cm. Cathedral of San Martino, Lucca. Photograph: Jeff Cotton. With kind permission of the Secretariat of the Cathedral of San Martino, Lucca.*

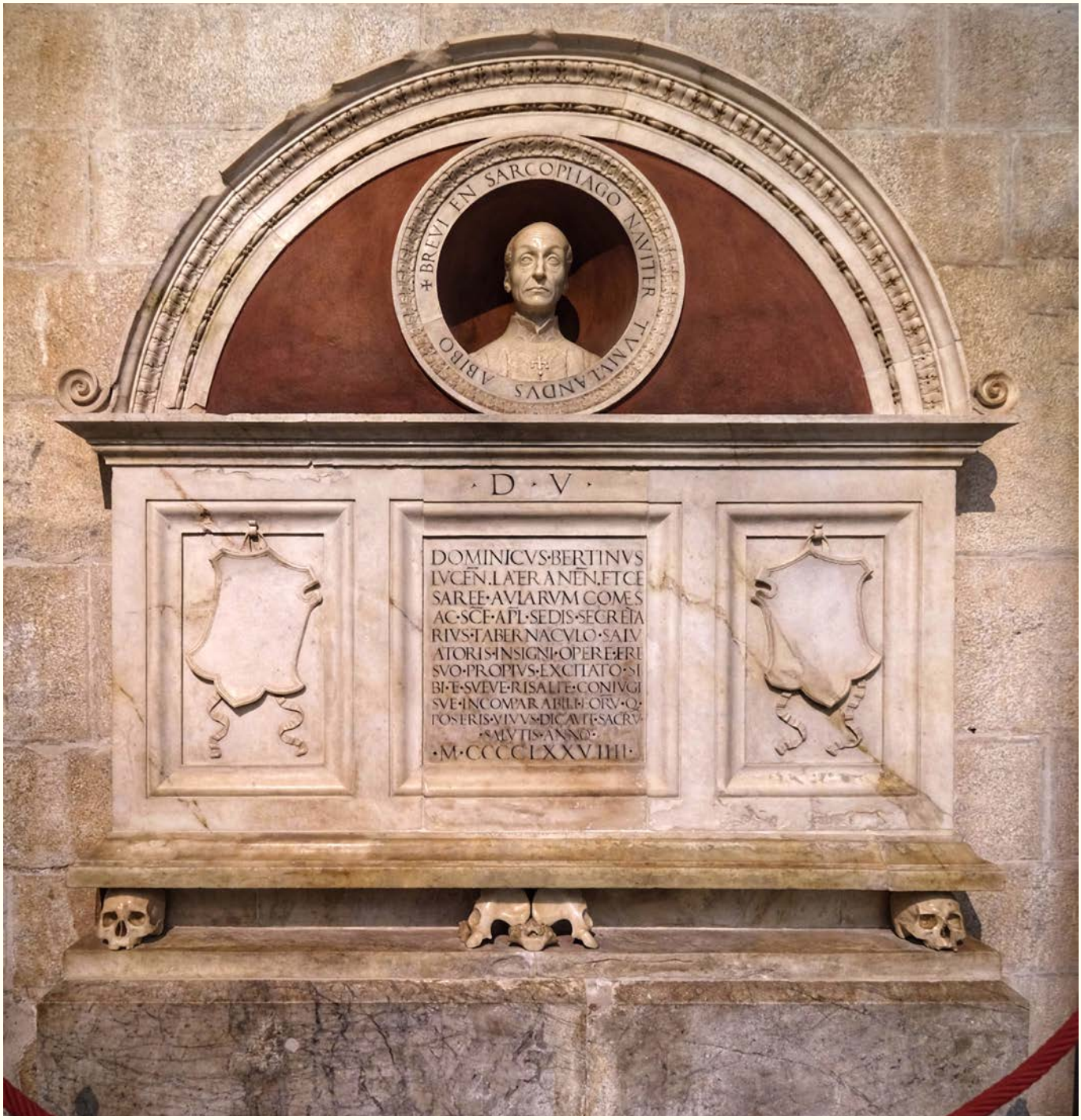


*Fig. 2: Matteo Civitali,* The Tomb of Domenico Bertini and his wife, Sveva Risaliti*, 1479-1480. Carrara marble and local stone with traces of gold leaf, 281.5 x 228.5 x 28.7 cm. Cathedral of San Martino, Lucca. Photograph: Jeff Cotton. With kind permission of the Secretariat of the Cathedral of San Martino, Lucca.*

of the *de rigueur* angels flanking the Virgin and Child in the Florentine tombs with the finely carved portraits of the late Pietro, and his son Nicolao, the tomb's patron, is an inspired innovation, lending an immediacy to the role of the Virgin as intercessor on Earth and in Heaven, and imbuing the sculpture with an aura of civic, as well as spiritual dignity.

Original not only in its detail, but also in its conception is the second of Civitali's commissions for the south transept, *The Tomb of Domenico Bertini and his wife, Sveva Risaliti* (Fig. 2). Like his friend Pietro da Noceto, the highly educated Bertini combined service to the government of Lucca with senior positions at the papal court in Rome. Civitali's most loyal patron, Bertini saw the completion of his tomb in 1479 or 1480 when he was in his early fifties, and for the next thirty-seven years until his death in 1506 had the opportunity to admire it. Though its basic format derives from the '*arcosolia*,' (arched) tombs found in many of Lucca's medieval churches, Civitali, no doubt in discussion with Bertini, borrowed from Antique funerary sculpture. For example, Bertini's striking portrait bust is framed within a roundel in the manner of a Roman funerary altar; its Latin

epigram, probably composed by the patron, 'Buried for only a short time, I will soon rise from this tomb' inscribed around it.[1] Though conceived as a Roman, Bertini is not wearing classical dress, but the sumptuous velvet brocade of a wealthy Lucchese citizen, beautifully chiselled by Civitali, the cross around Bertini's neck associated with the titles listed in another inscription on the lower section of the tomb, those of papal secretary, count palatine, and knight of the Lateran palace. On either side of this inscription the Bertini coat of arms, a golden cockerel referencing Gallicano, the small town in the Lucchese countryside where he was born, have been erased, probably by the French, who invaded Lucca in 1799. The whole structure rests on what until quite recently was seen as a macabre throwback to medieval times, or evidence of Bertini's morbid obsession with human anatomy – a pair of human skulls on both sides of the pelvic bones and vertebrae. In the context of a tomb once located close to Bertini's altar, founded in 1473 and dedicated to the Body of Christ, the skulls surely stand for Golgotha as the site of Christ's crucifixion, and perhaps for the dead Domenico and Sveva. The section vertebrae at the base of the spine, dividing the pelvic bones, is known as the *sacrum ossa*, the sacred bone. Combined with the Latin *pelvis*, a vessel or basin, this detail might be understood as 'the sacred vessel', a subtle allusion to the actual chalice that Bertini would have seen his chaplain drink from during the communion service. Sadly, dismantled in the 1560s, all that survives of the altar are the gorgeous *Adoring Angels* (Fig. 3) made for Bertini around 1480, still in the cathedral on the altar of the Sacrament; casts were taken in the 1890s for the Victoria and Albert Museum, where they are still on show.[2]

Domenico Bertini and Nicolao da Noceto were closely involved in the last, and most ambitious, of the three works located in the south transept, *The Tomb of St Regulus*, that can in many ways be seen as a summation of Civitali's achievement (Fig. 4). Seven metres tall, the monumental structure was probably based on Roman tombs that once lined the Via Appia in Rome, and, like Donatello and Michelozzo's *The Tomb of Antipope John XXIII* (Baldassare Cossa), c. 1421-1428, in the Florentine Baptistery, it fulfils a tripartite function as funerary monument, altar, and altarpiece. Located directly in line with the portal on the south side of the cathedral's façade, the almost life-size statue of St Regulus blesses the approaching worshipper, flanked by St Sebastian and St John the Baptist. The three predella scenes below illustrate *The Martyrdom of St Sebastian, The Decapitation of St Regulus*, and the beheading of the first saint to lose his head, St John, in *The Feast of Herod* (Fig. 6). This could well have been chosen to honour Lucca cathedral's English choirmaster at the time, the Carmelite friar, John Hothby, and the youthful

*Fig. 3: Matteo Civitali,* Adoring Angels, *c. 1480-85. Cathedral of San Martino, Lucca. Photograph: Jeff Cotton. With kind permission of the Secretariat of the Cathedral of San Martino, Lucca.*

*Fig. 4: Matteo Civitali,* The Tomb and Altar of St Regulus*, c. 1480-1485. Carrara marble, 682.5 x 344 x 67.8 cm. Cathedral of San Martino, Lucca. Photograph: Jeff Cotton. With kind permission of the Secretariat of the Cathedral of San Martino, Lucca.*

musician on the far right of the predella scene, who leans against the credenza whilst performing a part in the Mass of St Regulus, written for the monument's patron, Nicolao da Noceto.[3] Above the altarpiece, the tomb and effigy of St Regulus rest on a narrow platform between two angels with candelabra, and in the central niche is the Madonna, her eyes cast down towards the effigy of the saint, and the right hand of the Christ Child on her lap raised in a gesture of blessing. A final curious detail in this work is the tiny lizard that seems to be licking the underside of St Sebastian's toe, an allusion that has so far eluded plausible interpretation (Fig. 5).

In 1498, at the age of 62, Civitali married for a second time, and moved to Carrara, where he died in 1501. His last commissions were a *St George* that once stood on a pedestal in the centre of the nearby town of Sarzana, and the imposing Chapel of St John the Baptist in Genoa cathedral, completed to his design by various artists during the early sixteenth century. In Lucca, his sons and nephews continued to work for the cathedral authorities: his grandson, Vincenzo, finally completed the south transept in 1579, before leaving the city to work as a military architect for the Duke of Ferrara, over a century after Matteo had received his first commission for the tomb of Pietro da Noceto.

**Geoffrey Nuttall** *is an independent art historian with a special interest in the small Tuscan city of Lucca, and the patronage of its merchants and bankers across Europe during the late middle ages and Renaissance. He studied Philosophy at UCL, and Linguistics at Cambridge, before taking the MA in Art History at Birkbeck College, and PhD at the Courtauld Institute, where he was an associate lecturer. He continues to teach for the Institute's public programmes, at the V&A, and elsewhere. His recent publications include articles on Filippino Lippi's Lucchese patrons, and the chapel of the merchants of Lucca in Paris. He has lectured on the Renaissance for the London Art History Society, and in June 2022 led one of the Society's study tours to Lucca and the nearby cities of Pisa, Pistoia, and Prato, the high point a visit to the Carrara marble quarries.*

*Fig. 5: Matteo Civitali,* Detail of the Martyrdom of St Sebastian *(detail of Fig. 4). Photograph by kind permission of the Secretariat of the Cathedral of San Martino, Lucca.*

## Notes

Acknowledgement: with thanks to Dottore Francesco Niccoli for his help in preparing this article, and to Jeff Cotton for his photography.

1 Freely translated by the author, 'BREVI EN SARCOPHAGO NAVITER TVMVLANDUS ABIBO'.

2 It is also plausible that the frieze of spiritelli flanking the right side of Jacopo della Quercia's famous *Tomb of Ilaria del Carretto* may also have been made for Bertini's chapel.

3 The portrait bust next to *The Feast of Herod* is Nicolao's son, Pietro, Nicolao himself is next to the *Martyrdom of St Sebastian*. For Hothby, see Benjamin Brand, 'John Hothby and the Cult of St Regulus at Lucca,' *Early Music History*, 2008, 27, pp. 1-45, and Benjamin Brand, 'A Medieval Scholasticus and Renaissance Choirmaster: A Portrait of John Hothby at Lucca,' *Renaissance Quarterly*, 2010, 63, pp. 754-806.

## Further Reading

Virtually ignored by Vasari, except briefly at the end of the life of Jacopo della Quercia, and apart from general reference works, for example Stephen Bull's entry on Matteo Civitali, revised by John Nolan in 2003, in *Grove Dictionary of Art*, little has been published on him in English. For authoritative essays on the many aspects of his career, and for the illustrations alone, see the catalogue of the exhibition, *Matteo Civitali e il suo tempo, pittori, scultori e orafi a Lucca nel tardo Quattrocento*, Lucca, 3rd April-11th July 2004 (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2004), and Antonia d'Aniello and Maria Teresa Filieri (eds.), *Matteo Civitali nella cattedrale di Lucca, Studi e restauri*, (Lucca: Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Lucca, 2011).

*Fig. 6: Matteo Civitali and Assistants,* Predella panel from the Tomb of St Regulus of The Feast of Herod *(detail of Fig. 4). Photograph: Jeff Cotton. With kind permission of the Secretariat of the Cathedral of San Martino, Lucca.*

# Media revolution: printmaking in the fifteenth century

Ursula Weekes

The fifteenth century was a period of innovation and transition, as Europe began to move from a medieval mindset into the so-called 'early modern' era. The invention of printmaking in the fifteenth century played a vital role in this shift in the nature and scope of knowledge. The possibilities of mass communication afforded by prints had an enormous impact on the circulation of ideas, both textual and visual. Prints and printing were crucial in changing people's ideas of themselves, of the world around them, of God and the universe. This change was very noticeable by the start of the sixteenth century, but it rested on thousands of small experimental steps in the fifteenth century.

Printing in Europe originated in the late fourteenth century facilitated by the wider availability of paper in Europe by then. Paper had been a long-held secret of China and the Islamic world, until it filtered into Southern Spain through the Moors in the twelfth century. The famous *Bois Protat*, c. 1370-80, is the oldest surviving western woodblock though no contemporary historical impressions on paper survive (Fig. 1). Discovered in a house belonging to La Ferté Abbey in the Saône-et-Loire region of central France in 1898, it is a section – perhaps a quarter or third – of an image of the Crucifixion. The main figure remaining is the Roman centurion, from whom a speech banderole emerges, '*Vere filius Dei erat iste*' (Truly this was the Son of God). Scholars estimate that the complete woodcut was approximately a metre high which was larger than paper sizes in the fourteenth century, so it was probably printed on cloth.

The earliest surviving woodcut impressions on paper date from the 1420s and seem to concentrate in locations on the Upper Rhine in Germany. An attractive hand-coloured woodcut, known as *The Buxheim St Christopher*, is unusual for including an actual date, 1423 (Fig. 2). This makes it the earliest securely-dated woodcut print in Europe. The Latin inscription affirms that anyone who looks at the print will not die on that day. The size is roughly equivalent to a modern A4 sheet of paper. Prints such as this were sometimes pinned on walls or tucked into manuscripts. A painting of a *Female Donor Kneeling*, c. 1455, by the Bruges artist Petrus Christus shows a large devotional print of a saint attached to the wall with sealing wax (Fig. 3).

Woodcuts are a method of relief printing, where negative space in the design is cut away, leaving lines in relief that can be stamped on to paper by hand or in a press. Engravings involve the opposite method, known as intaglio, where the printmaker cuts into a copper plate using a sharp tool called a burin. Ink is then placed into the cut lines and the surface is wiped clean. By printing in a roller press under pressure, the ink is drawn out of the grooves to make an impression on paper. This process leaves a platemark, an indentation of the copperplate in the paper.

*Fig. 1: Anonymous artist,* Bois Protat*, c. 1370-80. Woodblock, with twentieth-century impression. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. Photograph: Wikipedia.*

The earliest engravings on paper in Europe date from the 1430s, and it seems that the first engravers were goldsmiths, who long had the necessary skills and tools. Goldsmiths worked for wealthy patrons and the earliest engravings have a strong connection to traditions of courtly love.

An anonymous artist, known as the Master of the Playing Cards (active c. 1430-50 in Alsace/Germany), is generally credited as the earliest engraver to have printed on paper. Several of his prints seem to be designs for playing cards, such as his engraving of the *Queen of Flowers* (Fig. 4). The queen was cut on one copper plate, and the little flower was cut on a second plate, evident from the platemark around the flower. She is seated on a fine brocade cushion, with a magnificent headdress, wearing intricate jewellery that perhaps references the goldsmith background of the artist. His technique is composed of short feathery strokes, typical of the earliest engravings.

A similar but developing technique is seen in the work

*Fig. 2: Anonymous artist,* The Buxheim St Christopher, *Upper Rhine, 1423. Woodcut with coloured wash, 28.9 x 20.6 cm. The John Rylands Library, Manchester. Photograph: Wikimedia Commons.*

of Master ES, a prolific engraver active c. 1450-67, who like the Master of the Playing Cards was probably located somewhere in Southwestern Germany or Switzerland. His work explores themes of courtly love, but he also reached wider audiences with his engravings of the *Ars Moriendi*, a very popular devotional book on the *Art of Dying*, which was also produced in an even cheaper blockbook format. He also made three pilgrimage souvenir prints of the *Madonna of Einsiedeln* of 1466. These were made to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the papal bull that granted absolution to pilgrims who worshipped at the statue of the Madonna in the Benedictine Monastery at Einsiedeln near Zürich.

For much of the fifteenth century, it was an open question as to where the future of book production would lie. When moveable type was invented in 1440 by Johannes Gutenberg, it was an extremely expensive means of book production. And the labour involved in producing early incunabula (that is, early printed books), was initially no less than that of writing and decorating manuscripts by hand.

Already by the early fifteenth century, there had been a shift from manuscript production as a bespoke trade dependent on a commission-based market to a trade increasingly focused on the open market. Thus, the environment in which entrepreneurial engravers began working was favourably disposed to finding new and more economical ways of producing illustrated books. The Master of the Berlin Passion began his career around 1450 and made his mark by focusing on inexpensive engravings that could be pasted or bound into manuscripts offering people who never could afford to buy painted miniatures the opportunity to have illustrated books. Eleven manuscripts made at Arnhem between about 1460 and 1480 contain many of his engravings pasted on to the vellum pages of the manuscript and integrated into the illumination of the manuscripts (Fig. 5).

The illuminators of this group of books, it turns out, were almost certainly nuns at the convent of Bethany outside Arnhem, one of the religious communities of the

*Fig. 3: Petrus Christus,* Female Donor Kneeling, *c. 1455. Oil on panel, 41.8 x 21.6 cm. Samuel H. Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., 1961.9.11. Photograph: National Gallery of Art/Public Domain.*

*Fig. 4: Master of the Playing Cards,* The Queen of Flowers, *c. 1435–40. Engraving printed from two plates, 13 x 9.1 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, Inv. 2006.429. Photograph: Metropolitan Museum of Art/ Public Domain.*

Windesheim Congregation associated with the pietistic movement of the *Devotio Moderna*. As part of the nuns' religious labour they would produce Books of Hours (prayerbooks for the canonical hours of the day) in their scriptorium. Ownership inscriptions in several of the books indicate the recipients were mostly women of the minor aristocracy in the Lower Rhine region, Margriet Uutenham, Griet Vogels and Sophia van Bylant.

The popularity of extensive written prayer cycles on the *Life of Christ* and the *Passion* during the late medieval period provided a major stimulus for engravers to produce cheap engraving cycles with as many as forty images to illustrate them. The works of authors such as Thomas à Kempis, Ludolph of Saxony, Jordanus van Quedlinburg and Heinrich Suso were widely disseminated both in Latin and in the vernacular and were read in monastic and lay contexts throughout the Netherlands and Germany. Numerous other Middle Dutch or Low German *Life of Christ* texts proliferated during the fifteenth century, most of whose authors and exact origins are unknown. Engraved cycles of images were ideally suited to illustrate this type of literature. To produce miniatures would be a laborious and expensive task, but prints provided new possibilities for illustrating these narrative prayer cycles quickly and inexpensively. Hans Belting argues that prints were a constituent element of the 'era of the private image' (Belting, *Bild und Kult*, p. 483). At a practical level, the Rhine and Maas rivers were critical to the success of these printmakers bringing them supplies of paper and enabling them easily to distribute prints to neighbouring towns.

My favourite booklet of engravings belonged to the Carmelite nun, Sister Gabriel, whose whole story I uncovered during my doctoral research. Sister Gabriel records her vows of becoming a nun above an engraving of the *Purification of the Virgin* in her booklet, 'I sister Gabriel make my profession and promise obedience to God and to the blessed Mother of God […] and to the Prioress of this place and those succeeding her, with perpetual chastity and renunciation of property according to the Rule of the said order, under perpetual enclosure, until death.' Records still held in the Carmelite convent of Onze-Lieve-Vrouw ten Troost at Vilvoorde near Brussels identify her as Sister Gabriel van der Hele, one of the founding nuns of the community who made her profession in 1461, and 'worked 53 years in the holy religion', dying in 1514. So, it seems women were often at the forefront as producers

*Fig. 5: Master of the Berlin Passion,* The Annunciation, *c. 1460. Engraving, 7.3 x 5.3 cm. Prayerbook made at Arnhem, Huth Hours, London: British Museum 1912,1022.1.3. Photograph: Ursula Weekes.*

*Fig. 6: Israhel van Meckenem,* Head of an Elderly Man with Long Beard and Turban*, c. 1480-1500. Engraving, 19.5 × 12.4 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, Inv. 17.50.62. Photograph: Metropolitan Museum of Art/Public Domain.*

and recipients of hybrid books during the second half of the fifteenth century.

By the last quarter of the fifteenth century, engravers were developing enhanced techniques to achieve long swelling and tapering lines for graphic impact, and complex systems of hatching and cross-hatching for tonal variation. Israhel van Meckenem (c. 1445-1503) was the most prolific Dutch-German printmaker of the fifteenth century, displaying virtuoso panache in his imaginary engraving *Head of an Elderly Man with Long Beard and Turban*, signed 'Israhel van Meckenem Goldsmit', establishing a clear link with the origins of engraving in the goldsmith workshops (Fig. 6). He made approximately 620 engravings, but only around 150 were original compositions. He ruthlessly copied works from other famous fifteenth-century printmakers such as Master ES, the Housebook Master, and Martin Schongauer. It alerts us to the fact that prints would not merely challenge the concept of the 'original' in art, but by their very existence they would, as good as, create the concept of 'original' and 'copy' through their capacity for multiplication and replication. In the next generation, Albrecht Dürer would initiate the first ever intellectual property lawsuit in 1506 travelling to Venice to challenge the Italian Marcantonio Raimondi, who had copied his *Life of the Virgin* woodcut series.

The identities of all the earliest engravers in the fifteenth century are shrouded in mystery. This is *a priori* why they are not household names. As Neil MacGregor once commented, 'A nameless artist, a construct of connoisseurship, whose intellectual and social origins cannot be investigated, who cannot be addressed in terms of politics or gender – he may just conceivably have been a woman – is, for modern art history, dominated as it is by the availability of written sources, little short of a catastrophe' (MacGregor, *A victim of anonymity*, p. 32). Yet these artists were consummate innovators, pushing forward a media revolution that would change access to images and the circulation of knowledge for the whole of society. Their contribution to art history and to world history can hardly be understated.

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# Gwen John: artist as saint

Lisa Thefaut

*Fig. 1: Gwen John,* The Artist in Her Room in Paris*, 1907-9.*
*Oil on canvas, 27.3 x 22.9 cm. Private Collection.*

*'Last night the thought came to me to take courage and decide to acquire these virtues – to become a saint'.*[1]

Gwen John contemplates the attainment of this ambition, confided in her letter to Auguste Rodin, in her self-portrait *The Artist in Her Room in Paris* (Fig. 1). Her jerky brush strokes animate brilliant sunlight to crown her head with an aureole of beatific light – just like the halo of a medieval saint. This modern female artist's association of herself with the distinctly unmodern form of life of a Catholic saint can appear paradoxical to secular minds. John lived and worked as an artist and artist's model in Paris, the epicentre of modern artistic production in the early twentieth century. She had followed her younger brother, the artist Augustus John, to the Slade, where she trained under Frederick Brown and Henry Tonks, later attending James McNeill Whistler's Académie Carmen in Paris. She admired the work of Paul Cézanne and Georges Seurat, counted Rainer Maria Rilke a friend and would meet many of the great icons of modern art, including Pablo Picasso and Constantin Brâncuşi. By the time she painted this self-portrait she had spent years amongst Rodin's artistic circle, as his model, amanuensis, and anguished lover.[2]

The circumstances of John's artistic production, as an independent female artist working in the capital city in which Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin conceptualised the mutability and fragmentation of modern life, explain why art-historical interpretation has tended to approach her work through the theoretical paradigms of gender and modernity.[3] Such analysis, whilst fruitful, has meant that although John's piety has been acknowledged and even the religious symbolism of some of her work remarked upon, to date full attention has not been given to the implications for her art of her desire for sainthood.

A profoundly Catholic doctrine, the Communion of the Saints sets out how elite saints, institutionally recognised, actively intercede on behalf of the faithful on earth.[4] Catholics experience this belief through a routine of devotion to the saints, in which all strive to imitate their example, in the hope that in the fullness of time, they too can join God in heaven and so themselves become saints. Daily devotional practice focused on life beyond death would have inflected John's lived experience; her representation of herself as a saint

*Fig. 2: Gwen John,* A Lady Reading*, 1909-11. Oil on canvas, 40.3 x 25.4 cm. Tate Britain.*

*Fig. 3: Albrecht Dürer,* Virgin with Child (Virgin with a Pear)*, 1526. Oil on panel, 43 x 31 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.*

therefore signifies a new way of thinking about both her identity and her life's purpose. From 1909, the last possible date of production of this self-portrait, John fills her notebooks with page after page of devotional advice, extracts from religious tracts and the lives of the saints.[5] The following year she moved from Montparnasse to the Rue Terre-Neuve (surely the name of the road must have drawn her to the rooms), her 'Newfoundland' within the close-knit Catholic community of Meudon, the Parisian suburb that was to be her home until her death in 1939.[6] Here, having received instruction from the local priest, John was formally received into the Catholic Church in 1913.[7]

The ideology of the saints inspires two more famous works also produced at this time – *A Lady Reading* (Fig 2) and *Girl Reading at the Window* (Fig. 4). Alicia Foster has pointed to the iconography of the Annunciation in these compositions; the subject of the lady reading, the fabric and cut of her dress and the interior setting.[8] She effectively suggests that the movement of the curtain implies the presence of the Angel Gabriel, making reference to a poem written by John's friend Rilke, in which Gabriel addresses Mary saying, 'I'm but a breeze within the wood, you, Lady,

are the Tree'. Although far from straightforward depictions of the Annunciation, it is clear that in these images John is purposefully using the Renaissance imagery of the quintessential Catholic saint, the Virgin Mary, to explore her own subjectivity and belief.

John wrote to lifelong correspondent Ursula Tyrwhitt, saying she had tried to make the figure in *A Lady Reading* (Fig. 2) look like a '*vierge* of Dürer …. because I didn't want to have my own face there.'[9] The features of the figure in *A Lady Reading* are indeed strikingly like those of Albrecht Dürer's *Virgin with Child* (Fig. 3) in the Uffizi in Florence.[10] Despite her protestation, in the remarkably similar second version of this composition, *Girl Reading at the Window* (Fig. 4), John does indeed replace the face of Dürer's Virgin with her own. The pencil and paper, and the classical bust on the bookshelf, in *A Lady Reading* are indexes of her art, which together with the pictures of her cats must affirm that the subject of both works is indeed the artist herself.

In visualising herself as no less a saint than the Virgin Mary, John consciously or unconsciously refers to the contemporary visual culture of devotion in France at this time, most particularly to the iconography of the cult of Thérèse Martin. Three years older than John,

*Fig. 4: Gwen John,* Girl Reading at the Window*, 1911. Oil on canvas, 40.6 x 25.4 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York.*

*Fig. 5: Céline Martin,* The Annunciation*, 1900. Oil on canvas, 130 x 97 cm. © Archives du Carmel de Lisieux.*

Thérèse was a Carmelite nun who died in 1897, aged just twenty-four, and a mere twenty-eight years later in 1925 was canonised as St Thérèse of Lisieux by Pope Pius XI.[11] The popular force of devotion to Thérèse over this period and her swift apotheosis were the direct result of a massive propaganda campaign, orchestrated by the Carmelite Order. This promoted not just her words (164,000 copies of her autobiography *The Story of a Soul* were sold between 1910 and 1915 alone) but also her image.[12] No less than 30,328,000 representations of the saint in books, on prayer cards and as devotional products were circulated between 1898 and 1925.[13]

Mass reproductions of photographs and paintings, many produced by Thérèse's sister, Céline (also a Carmelite sister), were designed to imprint her image in the French Catholic imagination and authenticate her sanctity. This cult saint was represented letting fall her iconic shower of roses on to the faithful, most poignantly on wounded French soldiers prostrate on a First World War battlefield, but also with the Holy Family, at the foot of the cross, as an angel and in the character of different saints, as Joan of Arc,

as St Agnes, and posed like her namesake St Teresa of Avila.[14] In these paintings John reinterprets this type of devotional role-play to signify her own desire to become a saint. If we look at a painting of *The Annunciation* (Fig. 5) in which the Virgin Mary has been given Thérèse's features, we can see that the bright white of the light and the angel's wing is very like that of the lace curtain in *Girl Reading at the Window*. Indeed, the shadow under John's table appears to provide a visual echo of the blue of the Virgin's dress and the flowers on the curtain to stand in for the Angel's lilies.

John's personal 'Annunciations' are visual signs of an existential turning point, the artist's acceptance of belief received from a divine source beyond her own psyche and symptoms of Catholic devotion to the saints; an imaginative process of contemplation, identification and becoming. The location in both pictures can be identified from the wallpaper and shape of the window as John's room (retained as a studio after her move to Meudon) at 6 Rue de l'Ouest.[15] In an extraordinary circumstance this means that the light which illuminates each figure's face comes directly from the Cours des Miracles situated immediately outside; light that represents for this artist, not the instant of Christ's incarnation, but rather a moment of inspiration from the Holy Spirit that bestows both the gift of faith, and the promise of sanctity.

The exhibition *Gwen John: Art and Life in London and Paris* continues at the Pallant House Gallery in Chichester until 8 October 2023.

**Lisa Thefaut** *is the winner of the London Art History Society Prize for the Best Modern Period Masters Dissertation for her research into Gwen John's art and Catholic devotion. She continues her research and hopes to write more on this subject. She worked for many years first in NHS management and then in secondary education. Her first degree was in history from York University.*

## Notes

1 Letter July 1914, quoted in Cecily Langdale, *Gwen John: with a catalogue raisonné of the paintings and a selection of the drawings*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 50.

2 Langdale, *John*, pp. 1, 7-17, 30-33, 39, 49, 97, 108.

3 See for example Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old mistresses: women, art and ideology*, New Edition, (London: I.B.Tauris, 2013), pp. 110-112.

4 The, 'Communion of Saints', Catechism of the Catholic Church, (2nd ed.), Part 1, Section 2, Ch. 3, Article 9, (para. 5/954-962), https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/__P2B.HTM (accessed 7/3/23).

5 Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, Gwen John; Papers at the National Library of Wales (Aberystwyth: National Library of Wales 1988), p. 23.

6 Langdale *John*, p. 49.

7 Lloyd-Morgan, Papers, p. 23.

8 Alicia Foster, *Gwen John*, (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), pp. 65-8.

9 Gwen John Manuscripts, National Library of Wales, MS 21468D, ff, 63-4.

10 Foster, *John*, pp. 66-67.

11 John Beevers, 'Introduction' in, *The Story of a soul; autobiography of St Thérèse of Lisieux*, (London: Doubleday, 1957), pp. vii-viii.

12 Beevers, 'Introduction' in, *The story of a soul*, p. xiv.

13 Richard Burton, *Holy tears, holy blood: women, Catholicism, and the culture of suffering in France, 1840-1970*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004) p.55; Lucia Deboick, *Image, authenticity and the cult of St Thérèse of Lisieux*, (Unpublished thesis, University of Liverpool, 2011) pp. vi, 12,168-189.

14 Deboick, *Image, authenticity*, pp. 74, 95-103, 112, 117, 295. See these images at Archives of the Carmel of Lisieux, archives.carmeldelisieux.fr/en/naissance-dune-sainte/iconographie-theresienne/

15 Mary Taubman, *Gwen John* (London: Scolar Press, 1985,) p. 118-119.

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The *London Art History Society Review* (formerly *ULEMHAS Review*) is an academic journal providing specially-commissioned articles by leading academics, curators and art historians on most aspects of art history, including art theory and studies, painting and the graphic arts, sculpture, decorative arts, architecture and photography. It is published annually, and free to members of the Society.

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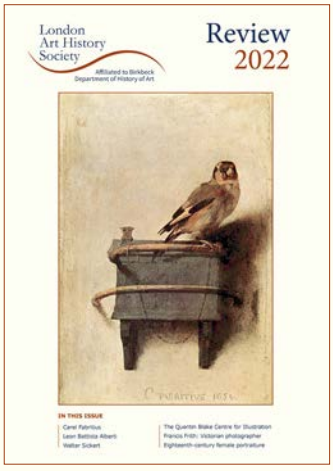

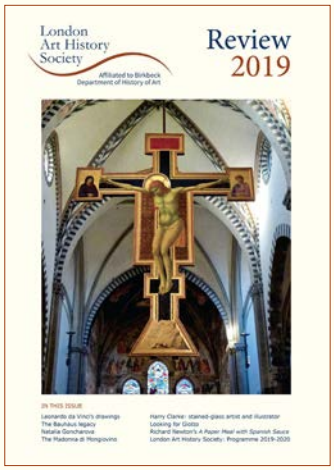

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