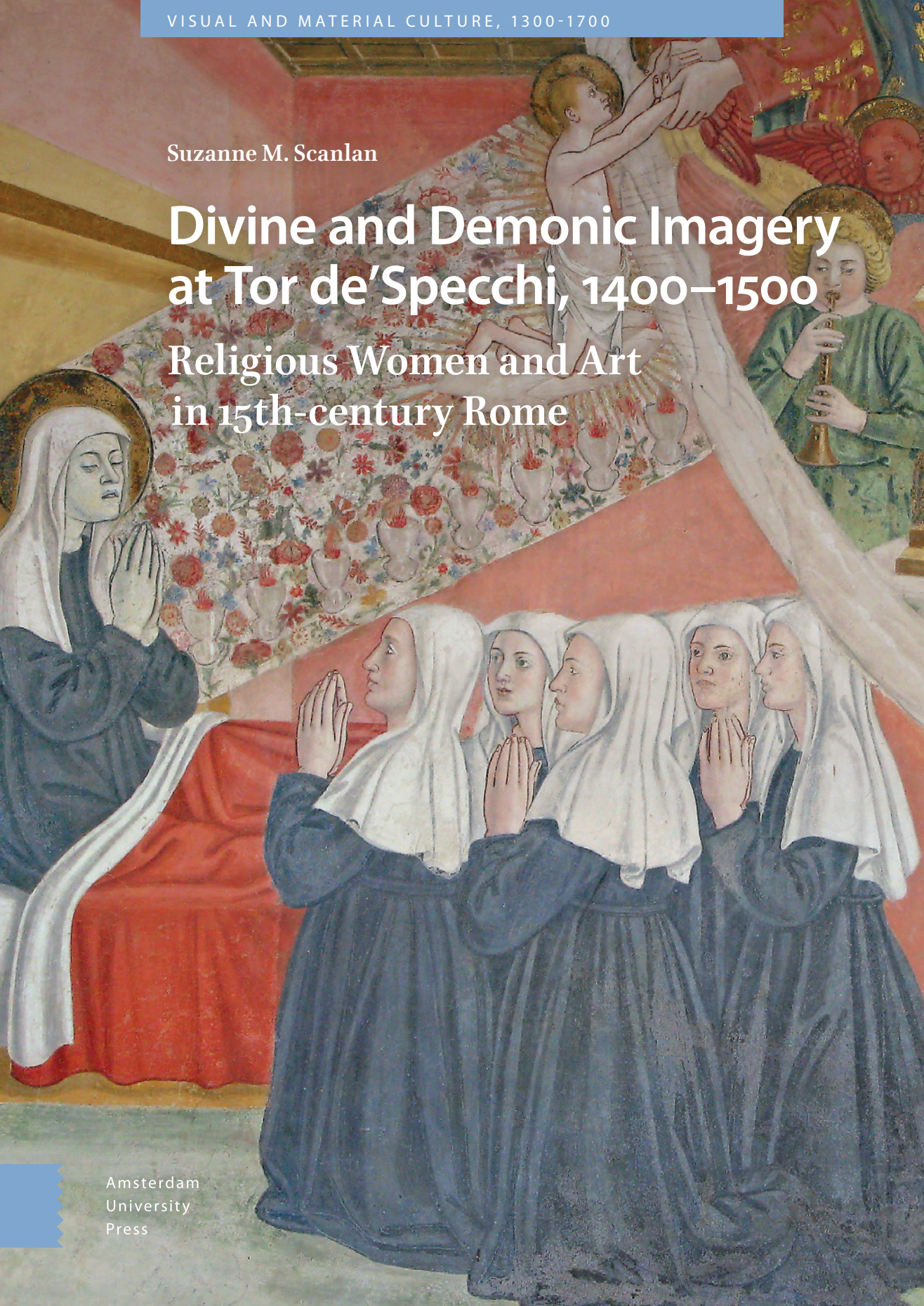


Suzanne M. Scanlan

Divine and Demonic Imagery at Tor de'Specchi, 1400–1500

Religious Women and Art in 15th-century Rome



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Suzanne M. Scanlan

Amsterdam University Press

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*For Em, Molly and Jimmy
With Love*

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Introduction: Demonic and Divine Bodies

On any given day in late fifteenth-century Rome, pairs of devoted women wearing prickly black dresses and crisp white veils crossed the threshold of their shared monastery on the Capitoline Hill and ventured into the squalid streets of the city. They set out to bring relief to poor, hungry and sick neighbors throughout their parish and took regular turns assisting at local hospitals. When they returned from their charitable work at sunset, they came home to a shared dwelling decorated with vibrant frescoes that reverberated with stories from the life of a Roman noblewoman, Francesca Bussa de'Ponziani (1384–1440). The design, appearance, purpose and context for these frescoes form the core of this book, as they tell us as much about daily life and making art in Renaissance Rome as they do about women's patronage, devotional practices and pious work during this period.

Pious women in Renaissance Italy relied on images to nourish their faith. Whether recalling a beatific vision to mind or contemplating a gilded altarpiece in church, women looked at pictures as an essential component of religious devotion. In Rome, larger-than-life mosaics depicting scenes from the lives of venerable saints sparkled on the walls and in the apses of early Christian basilicas, and illuminated the edifying ritual of the Eucharist performed during Mass. Numerous chapels, columns and niches in parish churches across the city were covered with paintings and votive images, evidence of robust forms of popular piety and affirmations of local miracles. In their homes, women regularly contemplated, and in many cases read, colorfully illuminated prayer books and devotional prints that offered ideals of feminine virtue as models for their own behavior. Many of these images were designed to demonstrate control over one's body and to encourage mastery of one's senses in the quest for eternal salvation. They also cautioned the viewer about the gruesome punishments awaiting those who failed to heed their warning and therefore succumbed to corporeal temptation.

This book examines diverse depictions of divine, demonic and all-too-human bodies made in Rome during a period of rapid expansion and renewal for the Church and city (1440–1500). It is not a study of Santa Francesca Romana herself, whose biography (*Vita*), legacy and eventual canonization in 1608 have been extensively examined by noted scholars such as Alessandra Bartolomei Romagnoli, Giulia Barone, Giorgio Carpaneto, Arnold Esch, Anna Esposito, Placido Lugano, and Mario Sensi.¹ Rather, I analyze specific motifs and moments from the impressive array of images made for the expanding community of women devoted to Francesca as primary evidence for women's spirituality, work and agency in the fifteenth-century city. Known as the Oblates of Santa Francesca Romana, Francesca's followers interpreted and recreated the spiritual, social and political *milieu* of Renaissance Rome inside their monastery, based on a model for living and worship set by Francesca Ponziani

during her lifetime. The oblates commissioned a series of panel paintings and two extensive fresco cycles that constitute a uniquely female and, I argue, quintessentially Roman contribution to the cultural heritage of quattrocento Italy. They serve as the cornerstone for my discussion of women who engaged with art patronage at the highest ecclesiastic and civic levels in Rome while shaping specific models for daily devotional living in their homes.

During the decades covered in this book, the papal Chapel of Nicholas V was decorated, the Vatican Library was established, the pontifical Hospital of Santo Spirito was renovated and the Sistine Chapel was built and richly frescoed.² As we will see, the Oblates of Santa Francesca engaged with all of these projects, and with the artists who designed and embellished them, when they decorated the spaces in which they lived and worshipped at Tor de'Specchi. Although there has been little contextual and interpretive analysis of the often innovative, hagiographic images commissioned by the oblates, this study shows that Francesca's followers were sophisticated and discerning consumers of art from the outset. While they acquired and adapted their permanent monastic quarters, they commissioned paintings to document Francesca's mystical visions and miraculous works in an effort to further the cause for her canonization. At the same time, the images were meticulously crafted to shape and define the oblates' private devotional practices, as well as to reflect the political and economic circumstances of communal life in a *casa santa*.

Francesca Ponziani and the Oblates at Tor de'Specchi

Francesca Bussa dei Ponziani came to prominence as an exemplar of charity and piety during a period of political and ecclesiastical instability in Rome when the papacy fought to regain a local foothold after the Great Schism of the Church, and parochial barons engaged in bloody conflict for territory and power.³ Francesca was born in 1384 in the Parione region of the city, the daughter of the nobleman Paolo di Giovanni Bussa and his wife Jacobella de' Roffredeschis. Fifteenth-century biographers of the would-be saint, most notably her confessor, Giovanni Mattiotti, characterized her as a woman who exhibited a sincere religious vocation even as a child, expressing a fervent wish to become a nun.⁴ Witnesses at the three *processi* or canonization trials commenced immediately after her death (1440, 1443, and 1451) also testified to Francesca's lifelong vocation. By all accounts she was married against her will at the age of eleven to Lorenzo Ponziani, the son of a cattle-farming family from Trastevere that was allied politically and socially to hers. She was believed to be so unhappy in the bonds of marriage that conjugal relations with her husband made her ill. Indeed, canonization witnesses reported that she vomited after intercourse throughout her married life.⁵ Yet, the Ponziani – Bussa marriage produced three children, two of whom died of the plague, and Francesca ultimately found ways to

simultaneously fulfill the duties befitting her social station while privately nourishing her religious devotion.⁶

As recent scholarship has shown, there were varied opportunities for women seeking to join a religious community in fifteenth-century Rome, ranging from nuns who observed strict enclosure (*clausura*) in a convent to tertiaries, or members of a third order, who lived according to a Rule (statutes governing daily living and worship) in a variety of settings.⁷ In her early work on semi-religious women in Italy, Katherine Gill proposed the community of oblates at Tor de'Specchi as a model study for the institutions known as "open monasteries" (*monasteri aperti*).⁸ Several types of community fell into this category: some consisted of nuns who took solemn vows but did not observe *clausura*; others petitioned the Pope for license to live in common but exempt from enclosure; and, finally, there were communities of laywomen who took no solemn vows and who may or may not have had formal ecclesiastical ties to a monastic order, bishop, or the papacy.⁹

As Mario Sensi has persuasively argued, the oblates of Tor de'Specchi primarily embodied the second category.¹⁰ Francesca's earliest followers were united by their commitment to emulate their founder's fervent religious devotion as well as their desire to serve Rome's poor. After Francesca's death, they called themselves the Oblates of Francesca Romana and lived according to a set of statutes modeled by Francesca Ponziani during her lifetime (see Appendix).¹¹ As noblewomen who were either widowed or unmarried, the oblates chose a vocation that allowed them collectively to acquire property in urban Rome and to furnish and decorate it according to the standards of the most prominent ecclesiastic and charitable institutions of the period.

By end of the quattrocento, I argue, the community had commissioned a series of small panel paintings and two fresco cycles that were comparable in scale and scope to contemporary papal projects at the Vatican and in the nearby Hospital of Santo Spirito.¹² In 1468, a series of 26 fully colored and highly detailed images portraying Francesca's mystical visions and mapping her miraculous thaumaturgic, spiritual, and charitable work throughout Rome were frescoed on the four walls of the community's private oratory, with explanatory captions written in Roman dialect (*romanesco*) accompanying each scene.¹³ The frescoes are currently attributed to the hand and workshop of the Roman painter known as Antoniazio Romano (Antonio di Benedetto Aquilo degli Aquili, c. 1430–c. 1510) and represent one of the most extensive pictorial cycles of the period extant in Rome today.¹⁴

Two decades later, in 1485, the oblates directed that an entire wall of their refectory, adjacent to the oratory, be painted with jarring and violent images of their founder's battles with the Devil.¹⁵ Rendered in green monochrome (*terra verde*), the ten panels that make up the series are life-size depictions of Francesca's ongoing nocturnal temptations by Satan and corporeal torture inflicted by demons. They are innovative and provocative representations of a woman's mystical visions and, in

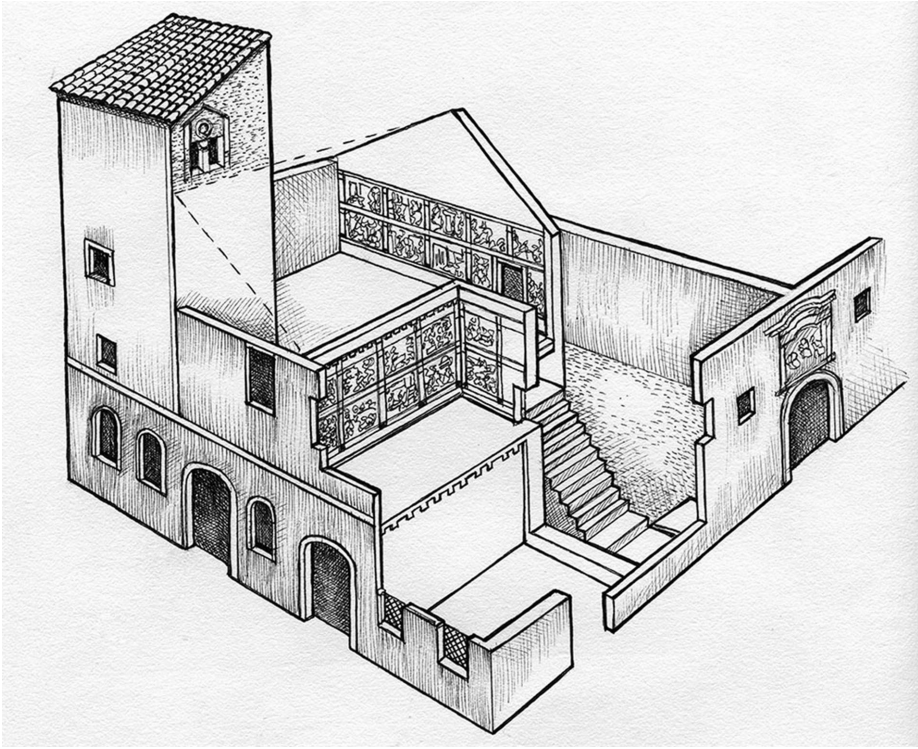


Figure 1: Perspectival reconstruction of fifteenth-century complex of Tor de'Specchi. © Matthew Bird, 2017.

some cases, show the Devil and his cohorts represented in recognizably human form. It is significant that the *terra verde* cycle was commissioned at a time when Christian beliefs in the power and omnipresence of the Devil and demonic forces were pervasive, and when accusations of witchcraft and diabolical magic were increasingly hurled against women and mystics.¹⁶ Further, the rise in vernacular preaching as well as the invention of printing in the mid-fifteenth century contributed to the spread of demonological literature, and the distribution of images of women consorting with the Devil.¹⁷

Primary Sources

From the day that she died on March 9, 1440, the Church and *cittadini* of Rome publicly commemorated Francesca Ponziani's extraordinary sanctity.¹⁸ Her body was transported in a solemn and widely attended procession from the Palazzo Ponziani in Trastevere to the Basilica of Santa Maria Nova in the Forum, where it was laid out for two days and three nights of public viewing. Following a funeral mass presided over by the Olivetan Abbot Fra Ippolito di Roma, Francesca Romana was interred in

a sepulcher next to the high altar of Santa Maria Nova, an honor accorded only to the most important figures of the Church.¹⁹

After Francesca's death, official documentation of her mystical life and miraculous works began to take shape. Giovanni Mattiotti, the rector of a chapel at the basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere and Francesca's spiritual confessor, immediately wrote a lengthy treatise in the Roman vernacular describing the divine and demonic visions that Francesca had recounted to him or experienced in his presence. Soon afterwards, his treatise was translated into Latin. In her critical edition of Mattiotti's original Latin texts, Alessandra Romagnoli lists the following as the original quattrocento sources that comprise the foundational hagiographic corpus documenting the life and work of Francesca Romana:

1. the transcripts of the three canonization *processi* (1440, 1443, 1451);
2. the mystical and visionary treatises and *Vita* of Mattiotti, written in both Latin and vernacular forms between 1440 and 1447;
3. three redactions of Mattiotti's *Vita*, written by Fra Ippolito di Roma, between 1452 and 1453; and
4. the two fresco cycles at Tor de'Specchi – the oratory cycle of 1468 and the refectory cycle of 1485.²⁰

In a previous study, I proposed the hagiographic corpus be expanded to include three little-known panel paintings commissioned by the oblates, made during the same decade that Mattiotti was writing his treatises.²¹ Though they have been identified as representations of events narrated in Mattiotti's *Trattati*, these have not been analyzed or contextualized as the oblates' initial contributions to the legacy of Francesca Romana.

The written sources can be divided into two distinct contemporary versions of events that show how Francesca's identity became a contested site for the simultaneous representation of a strong religious leader and a pious, modest female saint. Produced in the 40 years or so after Francesca's death, they shaped an enduring image of the *beata* that was composed from well-established hagiographic tropes combined with signs of a uniquely Roman identity and association. Here, I use the term *beata* in relation to Francesca in accordance with its literal meaning – "blessed one." Indeed, the phrase "blessed soul" (*beata anima*) was part of the original inscription on Francesca's tomb in Santa Maria Nova.²² In Catholic doctrine, beatification became an official step in the process of canonization, defined as formal ecclesiastical permission to venerate a holy person, with restriction to specific places and certain liturgical exercises.²³ Though no record of Francesca's official beatification has been published to date, she was referred to as "*beata* Francesca" in contemporary sources, most notably the canonization proceedings.

Mattiotti's personal and highly emotional tracts were gleaned from his recording of his frequent meetings with Francesca, during which she made confession and received Holy Communion. Along with canonization testimony, they formed the

principal inspiration for the spiritual foundation of the community of oblates and were the primary sources for the content of the panel paintings and the Tor de'Specchi frescoes.²⁴ Fra Ippolito's biographies were more official and sanitized versions of Mattiotti's tracts. As abbot of the Olivetan monastery that oversaw the oblates of Tor de'Specchi at the time of her death, he presented Francesca as an exemplar of the penitential and charitable female, in accordance with monastic ideals that stressed solitude and withdrawal from the outside world.²⁵ As this study shows, these ideals were addressed in terms of the oblates' ongoing experience inside and outside their monastery in the pictorial versions of Francesca's *Vita* that were commissioned, designed, and utilized at Tor de'Specchi.

To date, no contracts for the two fresco cycles at Tor de'Specchi have been identified among records kept at the convent or in archives in or beyond Rome. My discussion of the Oblates of Francesca Romana as the primary or sole patrons of the paintings is therefore arguably speculative. As Anabel Thomas has demonstrated, negotiations for the commissioning of convent imagery could involve parties both inside and outside the convent. In some cases, male advisors (both lay and religious) served as intermediaries between artists and female religious communities, counselling both parties in financial matters and in terms of the desired content for contracted work.²⁶ That the oblates at Tor de'Specchi were knowledgeable viewers and interpreters of their frescoes is certain, however. The women who founded the community hailed from noble families that comprised the primary patronage class in quattrocento Rome. Many of them had lived with Francesca Ponziani and testified at hearings for her canonization. Indeed, it was through family connections and inheritance that the initial oblates acquired the building and property that was to be converted for their shared monastic dwelling. My discussion of the oblates as patrons therefore relies on their extensive social and ecclesiastical networks as noblewomen of the patronage class as the foundation for their dealings as a community, whether or not they contracted for the frescoes with the assistance of an outside advisor. It is in this context that I argue for their active participation in and contribution to the commissioning and design of the fresco cycles for the fifteenth-century oratory and refectory at Tor de'Specchi, in the service of their own religious practices and devotion as well as to advance the cult and canonization of Francesca Romana.

Organization of the Book

The practice of painting in monastic spaces in Italy had as much to do with corporeal control as with spiritual edification. Refectory imagery in particular was designed to limit bodily pleasure and gustatory excess for the monastic viewer by redirecting the senses toward spiritual and corporeal temperance. Much of the growing scholarship on convent art and refectory decoration in Italy has focused on monastic spaces in

Florence and Tuscany.²⁷ Research on images made for Roman refectories, and indeed for Roman monastic communities in general, is scant and fragmented at this point, often embedded within larger surveys or monographs.²⁸ Pathbreaking studies of women as patrons and founders of convents in Rome center on the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and provide important methodological models for looking at earlier communities.²⁹ This study therefore expands the temporal boundaries of the literature on patronage and art made for women and monastic spaces in Rome, and the geographic boundaries of the scholarship on the visual culture of religious communities in Italy, while providing a close reading of the images made for the quattrocento community at Tor de'Specchi.

Within the Tor de'Specchi complex, Francesca Romana was often depicted framed by a doorway, on the threshold between two spaces, or, in the case of the demonic refectory images, blocked from entry or exit. In my first chapter, I draw on anthropological models of liminality to discuss the meaning of the position by a doorway as a metaphor for the oblates' transition from secular to monastic society and from worldly laywomen to chaste servants of God. It also represents Francesca on the threshold of sainthood, specifically portrayed as Rome's mystical visionary and miraculous healer. The symbolic and ritual significance of doorways in ancient Rome, as represented in popular literature and theatre, and as ultimately appropriated by Renaissance popes, add rich layers of meaning to a seemingly mundane iconographic motif for the oblate viewers. Here, I demonstrate how the fresco cycle for the Tor de'Specchi oratory draws on imagery and iconography from the papal chapel of Nicholas V, where Francesca was represented alongside venerated Roman martyrs as an exemplar of Christian *caritas*. The visual connections to the papal chapel link the oblate community and the monastery of Tor de'Specchi to the Vatican, and pay homage to one of the most important ecclesiastical commissions of the period.

As individuals and as a community who gave succor and charitable assistance in homes, streets, and hospitals of Rome, the oblates of Tor de'Specchi often found themselves in situations that simultaneously put them in the Devil's pathway and presented an opportunity to perform works that would be pleasing to God. Oratory images of Francesca Romana's thaumaturgic healing and miraculous charity offered the oblate community avenues for navigating the urban landscape with their eyes ever trained on the spiritual realm. In retrospect, they also present us with evidence of women's collective work and agency within the evolving political and economic environment of quattrocento Rome.

During their first 50 years as a formal, ecclesiastically sanctioned community (roughly 1435–1485), the oblates of Tor de'Specchi commissioned diverse painted representations of Francesca Ponziani's divine visions and demonic apparitions. These "visions made visible" were designed specifically for the urban spaces that were shared, shaped, and decorated by the women who were Francesca's initial *sorelle* (sisters), and range from rather stilted figural compositions in tempera on

panel to naturalistic *terra verde* frescoes featuring life-size male nudes. Considered as a group, they epitomize significant developments in quattrocento representations of the body and manifest principles of contemporary art theory.

Chapter 2 focuses on the initial group panel paintings (c. 1445) portraying a series of vignettes from Francesca Ponziani's divine visions, and subsequent oratory frescoes based on them. Likely commissioned by the oblates for their private burial chapel outside of Tor de'Specchi, the small panels represent the community's particular contribution to the hagiographic corpus that initially defined the image of Santa Francesca Romana. I draw on late medieval optical theory, the theology of vision, and contemporary Italian religious texts that guided women through meditative and mnemonic practices in order to explain specific iconographic cues in the panels that were meant to be viewed at close range. Like many pious mystics before her, especially charismatic holy women like Catherine of Siena or Bridget of Sweden, Francesca Ponziani was blessed with divine visions and beset by demonic temptation.³⁰ Mattiotti's written accounts of her visions have been scrutinized by scholars for connections to late medieval hagiography, literature, and imagery.³¹ Yet, the pictorial representations of Francesca's mystical life as commissioned by the oblates not only correspond to specific passages from Mattiotti's *Trattati*, but also shaped a dynamic meditative and devotional practice for the nascent monastic community.

My third chapter focuses on the sculptural, muscular, and naked bodies of the demons imagined in the Tor de'Specchi refectory that appear to be too tempting as visual material intended for a community of religious women. Yet, they are perfectly in line with quattrocento artists' growing preoccupation with anatomical studies and the practice of life drawing that grew from a desire to make images more forceful, and to narrow the gap between reality and representation. As such, they depicted the demonic trials of Francesca Romana in a more naturalistic manner within the virtual sensorium that was at once the oblates' dining space and site for ritual penance. Drawing on art theory of the period, and innovative methods for depicting the sacred and profane body, I examine how and why ideas about temptation, penance, sexuality, and punishment were incorporated into the Tor de'Specchi images. At the same time, I argue that the refectory frescoes ultimately glorified Francesca's triumph over corporeal satiation and sin. Meant to be understood as both didactic and interactive, the paintings firmly point to the oblates' discerning knowledge of artists and imagery circulating among Florentine workshops engaged in painting the Sistine Chapel walls.

Diana Hiller's recent study of Last Supper imagery commissioned for both male and female monastic houses in Florence advanced our understanding of gendered viewership and dining rituals enacted in the presence of refectory frescoes.³² In my final chapter, I consider these issues in a Roman context, analyzing the *terra verde* frescoes of Francesca's demonic temptation in relation to the Tor de'Specchi

refectory as a ritual space and in conversation with the extensive cycle in the adjacent oratory. Here I argue that the unusual, and to my knowledge anomalous, cycle at Tor de'Specchi was commissioned in accordance with the Roman oblates' desire to conform to monastic protocol by weaving traditional themes and iconography into the context of Francesca's encounters with the Devil. Though, on the surface, the demon cycle appears to be a far cry from well-known images of the Last Supper, they were designed to accommodate similar ritual and spiritual practices for the oblate viewers. Finally, I examine *terra verde* as an effective medium for representations of the night and the demonic realm, and as a terrifying and naturalistic backdrop for the performance of ritual penance.

The noblewomen-turned-oblates who commissioned the impressive body of imagery at Tor de'Specchi were at once pious servants of God and savvy consumers of art, reflecting their liminal status as residents of a monastic community and also as active participants in Roman society. The expansive cycles of their convent embody many of the ambiguities and paradoxes of late-medieval piety. The oblates' theatre of Francesca's demonic visions serves to initiate a conversation about how early modern women taught themselves to picture the Devil as a real and ever-present force to be vanquished and, importantly, expands our idea of images made at the behest of religious women to include the parochial communities of fifteenth-century Rome.

In my final analysis, I explore the transformation and tensions between foundational images of Francesca that were central to the oblates' lived experience and devotional practices inside their convent at Tor de'Specchi, and official representations of Santa Francesca Romana that served ecclesiastical reforming agendas in the decades around her eventual canonization by Pope Paul V in 1608. My Epilogue looks ahead to the canonization of Francesca Romana in 1608, when the oblates of Tor de'Specchi were sequestered behind convent walls. By this time, pictorial styles had been widely adapted to conform to Counter-Reformation ideals and mandates for image making and display. Here, I consider artwork and material goods commissioned to commemorate the canonization, by both the community at Tor de'Specchi and ecclesiastical officials, in order to accentuate these changes in style and to argue for a shift in patronage patterns based on them.