

Women, Art and Observant Franciscan Piety

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Women, Art and Observant Franciscan Piety

Caterina Vigri and the Poor Clares in Early Modern Ferrara

Kathleen G. Arthur

Amsterdam University Press

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Abbreviations

Baltimore, MD, USA

The Walters Art Museum (WAMBa)

Bologna

Archivio di Stato (ASBo)

Archivio Generale Arcivescovile, Archivio della beata Caterina (AGABo)

Archivio del Convento di Corpus Domini (ACDBo)

Biblioteca Comunale Archiginnasio (BCABo)

Biblioteca Universitaria (BUBo)

Ferrara

Archivio del Convento di Corpus Domini (ACDFe)

Archivio di Stato (ASFe)

Archivio Storico Comunale (ASCFe)

Archivio Storico Diocesano (ASDFe)

Biblioteca Comunale Ariostea (BCAFe)

Florence

Biblioteca Riccardiana (BRFi)

Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale (BNCFi)

London, The British Library (BLLo)

Mantua, Archivio di Stato (ASMa)

Milan

Archivio di Stato (ASMi)

Biblioteca Ambrosiana (BAMi)

Modena

Archivio di Stato (ASMo)

Biblioteca Estense Universitaria (BEUMo)

Oxford, Bodleian Library (BLOx)

Perugia, Biblioteca Comunale Augusta (BCAPe)

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA

University of Pennsylvania Library (UPPh)

Vigri/Vegri, Caterina, ed. Degl'Innocenti, *Le Sette Armi Spirituali* (SAS-Degl'Innocenti)

Bembo, Illuminata, ed. Mostaccio, *Specchio di Illuminazione* (SdI-Mostaccio)

Introduction

In the summer of 1455 Duke Borso d'Este received a letter from the Bishop of Ferrara, Francesco dal Legname, warning him that Ferrara might lose one of its most illustrious nuns. The bishop had heard from the abbess of the Poor Clares convent of Corpus Christi that their mistress of novices, Sister Caterina Vigri, had been selected as abbess of a new house in Bologna. Borso replied through his secretary, Ludovico Casella, reassuring him that something would be worked out so that Ferrara would not lose 'that holy woman'.¹ The woman in question had been Borso's childhood companion at the d'Este court and a lifelong friend of his sister Margherita d'Este. Neither the bishop nor the duke could prevent Vigri's departure for Bologna with a dozen sisters on 22 July, 1456. Corpus Christi continued to flourish, but only later did Ferrara replace this holy woman who had benefited Ferrara's reputation and helped maintain the wellness of the civic body. The incident is an extraordinary testament to the civic status of an enclosed nun.

Now known as Corpus Domini but called 'Corpus Christi' in the fifteenth century (the name that will be used in this text), this convent was for 30 years home to the mystic, writer, teacher and nun-artist Caterina Vigri (1413–63), who later became Saint Catherine of Bologna. This volume focuses on the formative period of her life, her writings and her artwork in the convent culture of the Poor Clares in Ferrara. The Observant Franciscan spirit is epitomized in her charismatic teaching as 'Mistress of Novices'. Her large body of writings based on scriptural, Patristic and Franciscan sources suggest that she and her audience were mostly literate, well-educated women. Using her own 'little book', she taught poverty, humility, active prayer and obedience. Her reputation for holiness, fasting and prayer fueled the convent's dynamic growth and patronage, and helped establish its pious reputation. Vigri's *Sette Armie Spirituali* has been studied as a private spiritual treatise reflecting mystical visions of Christ, but it is also a practical didactic text for aspiring nuns. Sister Caterina vividly recounts her visions of Christ, and the machinations of the devil, who appears in the guise of the Virgin or even Christ himself. She employs visual metaphors that must have captured the attention of even the most bored and distracted novice. Besides the *Sette Armie Spirituali*, her mysticism is reflected in her copying and heavily illustrating a 500-page breviary. This codex, held as a holy relic, has lacked a modern study with description and analysis of relationships between the text, personal rubrics and saints' drawings. Sister Caterina's unique breviary is presented here as an expression of the mystical, meditative aspects of her Observant Franciscan devotion.

This volume reaches beyond Caterina Vigri's best-known works to examine her early roots in an Augustinian-inspired house of semi-religious women (called *pinzochere* or *bizzoche*) founded in c.1410. It reconstructs their independent, urban,

semi-religious lifestyle based on extant and lost artworks, relics and material objects listed in an inventory of 1426, all of which demonstrate their work as needlewomen producing and repairing ecclesiastical vestments. The inventory provides evidence of the furnishing of their house with altarpieces, relics and ritual objects associated with the Virgin Mary, the Eucharist and Gesù Bambino. The text investigates how they engaged with these artistic cult objects, and what occurred as they were drawn into a process of 'conventualization', in which the Church regularized the community through the collaboration of women from the d'Este, Malatesta and Pio da Carpi families and the Observant Franciscans.

Besides exploring the *pinzochere* background, this book aims to uncover the women's networks that fueled the growth of Corpus Christi, and to provide a well-documented history of its development. Unlike many women's convents, the extant archives and women's own writings support a monographic-type study that provides evidence of women's lives in a period about which scholars often have fragmentary knowledge and must rely on theories and hypotheses. Close attention is paid to the social character, literacy and interrelationships linking the nuns with the d'Este rulers and other regional courts. Individual nuns' professions, lives in religion and social and educational status can be tracked for 135 women who passed through the convent c.1420–c.1520. At first, the new Poor Clares were deeply concerned with building a public reputation for Observant piety that contrasted with the older Urbanist Poor Clares at San Guglielmo. The adoption of Clare's *Prima Regola* (First Rule) after John of Capistrano's 1447 clarification of its 'modern' usage, helped cement their reputation. Their architecture, art and visual culture demonstrate this goal as well. In the mid-fifteenth century the church received two new altarpieces, the *Entombment of Christ* and the *Adoration of the Host*, which perfectly encapsulated the dedication to 'Corpus Christi', or the Body of Christ, and represented a 'Franciscanization' of the entombment theme.

After Sister Caterina Vigri departed in 1456 to establish Corpus Domini in Bologna, the Ferrarese convent found fresh leadership and stronger connections with the d'Este family, and reinvented themselves with new civic, political and educational agendas. Vigri's artistic legacy endured through production of *Sette Armi Spirituali* copies and other Franciscan texts. Although the first Observant reformers died by 1465, Corpus Christi continued their devotion to San Bernardino of Siena. But when the merchant/courtier Giovanni Romei bequeathed his elegant Renaissance palace to the Poor Clares in the 1480s, their humble environment was transformed. Tripled in size, the convent accommodated novices, nuns, students or *educande* and ducal visitors who retreated there for meditation and prayer. Duchesses Eleonora d'Aragona, Isabella d'Este, Bianca Maria d'Este and Lucrezia Borgia all supported the convent, and Corpus Christi became a d'Este commemorative site. Duke Alfonso I d'Este, who stabilized the convent's financial resources, chose burial there with his mother Eleonora d'Aragona and wife Lucrezia Borgia. This history illuminates the

tensions in the revival of Francis and Clare's original ideals of poverty and humility in the later fifteenth century. Born in Ferrara, Savonarola's influence was felt in the growth of Dominican Observance. In the later fifteenth and early sixteenth century, the Poor Clares' original mission adapted to new realities, the *realpolitik* of convent identity in the public civic space of Ferrara.

This volume espouses the foundational principle of visual culture: that art history should not be a history of 'the creation of masterpieces', nor just public, religious, or, in this case, north Italian court art with its underlying or overt expression of political power and status.² Further, it must encompass the art of women artists, even when their materials, media and imagery differ from professional standards and Renaissance court taste. Their inventive, idiosyncratic iconography and intuitive visual meanings, as Hamburger delineates them in the artwork of German nuns, are essentially creative, expressive, and revealing of their devotional experience.³ The importance of considering the historical and religious context, the way the nuns engaged with their religious images, and their potential meanings in a cloistered women's world is fundamental to the social and cultural history of art.

While art, architecture and illuminated manuscripts at the d'Este court have garnered strong interest from scholars, such as Gundersheimer, Rosenberg, Boskovits, Campbell, Manca, Canova, Toniolo, Tuohy, Barstow and others, the art of Ferrarese convents has attracted less attention.⁴ Apart from archival research by religious historians, including Samaritani, Franceschini, Lombardi, Peverada and Superbi, few published studies exist on convents that housed a large number of women in the later fifteenth-century.⁵ There is no Ferrarese equivalent to Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, and local historical fonts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries offer only sketchy accounts of artworks within enclosure.⁶ Coupled with the fact that Ferrara was strongly affected by the Napoleonic suppression of the monasteries, research prospects might look dim if it were not for the enormous data on donations and art patronage in the d'Este court records in the Archivio di Stato, Modena.⁷ As in other women's convents, chronicles and necrologies provide essential internal records, while references to lost altarpieces can be found in d'Este court records and Corpus Christi archives. These materials, along with Lombardi's essential work, *I Francescani a Ferrara*, lay a basis for rediscovering the convent's social history, art, architecture and visual culture.

The impact of gender studies has created an explosion in research on sixteenth-century women artists, female convent culture, religious and laywomen's art and architectural patronage, portraiture and manuscripts, but researching fifteenth-century Italian nun artists has been more difficult due to problems identifying the personalities and their artworks.⁸ In 1996 Jeryldene Wood discussed Vigri's paintings as expressions of Poor Clare spirituality, but subsequently scholars have removed most works from Caterina's *œuvre*, so that only her personal breviary now

is considered autograph work.⁹ Fortunati and Leonardi adopted a thematic approach in their publication of Vigri's breviary in 2004 that obscured the integrative creative process by which the nun copied, extensively annotated, and illuminated the 'Divine Word'. The characterization of her drawing as 'naïve and childlike' does not enhance respect for and understanding of her artistic achievement.¹⁰ Despite theoretical models developed in Hamburger's studies of German *Nonnenarbeit*, such careful, multidisciplinary approaches generally have not been deployed for fifteenth-century Italian nun artists.

This is not true for early modern Italian women writers, devotional literature and convent education. Much progress has been made analyzing the writings of Franciscan saints and *beate* such as Clare of Assisi, Caterina Vigri, Camilla Battista Varano and Angela of Foligno (to name a few). New critical editions of Vigri's writings, including the *Sette Armi Spirituali*, the *Rosarium Metricum*, the *Dodici Giardini*, the *Sermoni*, the *Laudi, Trattati e Lettere*, as well as her sermons or lessons found in Casanova's copies, have opened a rich vein of research, along with the critical edition of Illuminata Bembo's *Specchio di Illuminazione* that provides material about Vigri's life and intentions as a writer and artist.¹¹ Scholars of late medieval Franciscan and Poor Clares history and literature, such as Delarun, Knox, Roest and Mooney, have led the way in examining the spread of the Observant Reform among Poor Clares, the Pre-Tridentine educational texts and convent practices, as well as the development of cults of Franciscan women leaders. As with the recent discovery a new life of Saint Francis, new texts may yet come to light. This religious research supports a multidisciplinary approach in art history and visual culture.

A final note concerning the process of reconstructing the convent and its visual culture: the Napoleonic suppressions of 1797–1814 complicate the history of all Ferrarese ecclesiastical institutions. When the Cisalpine Republic was declared in July 1797, the Ferrarese nobleman Giambattista Costabili (1756–1841) was part of the ruling directorate. He already had inherited a library and art collection from his father, and when ecclesiastical property sales began, he acquired most Trecento and Quattrocento paintings from Corpus Christi, now known as Corpus Domini. In 1838–41 his collection was meticulously catalogued by Camillo Laderchi, including notations of provenance for 591 artworks.¹² Along with French inventories and the nuns' own documents, these sources form a reasonably accurate picture of the fifteenth-century convent. Given the arc of time, it is difficult to discern the artworks' specific locations, but we can infer which ones constituted a public statement in the external church in contrast to artworks intended for the female religious audience in the nuns' choir or internal convent. We cannot assume that all fourteenth- and fifteenth-century artworks from the convent were present in the 1400s; they may have been acquired when Santo Spirito was destroyed in 1512 and possessions were stored at Corpus Christi, or when the nuns from San Bernardino returned to Corpus Christi in 1798. With the decisive shift in artistic taste in Ferrara in the early sixteenth century

due to the Raphaelesque style of Garofalo, fifteenth-century artworks were stored away and forgotten. The inventory of 1426 creates a firm boundary for describing their possessions at that time. Preserved fifteenth-century works from the Costabili Collection and works documented in inventories contribute to reconstructing the visual and material culture that was in more than one sense created by the Franciscan Observant Reform.