DEVOTIONAL CULTURE, ARTISTIC MOBILITY, AND HISTORICIZED SACRED PORTRAITURE IN NAPLES

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Abstract: *Picturing saints was a central aspect of artistic production in Baroque Naples. Both local and visiting artists specialized in executing historicized sacred portraits of favored intercessors such as Saint Januarius, Saint Agatha, and Saint Lucy. Simon Vouet, Artemisia Gentileschi, Jusepe de Ribera, Guido Reni, and others dedicated their careers to portraitlike representations of saints—many of which were collected by Neapolitan patrons and buyers. That the most celebrated painters in Naples focused their talents on creating devotional images of saints distinguished the city from other artistic centers. This paper analyzes early modern Neapolitan devotion to martyrs and saints and how local religious practice engendered a particularly affecting and naturalistic manner of depicting holy figures, particularly early Christian virgin martyrs. Furthermore, this paper aims to understand how the specific gestures and representations of saints became a distinguishing feature of Neapolitan religious art.*

Keywords: *Intercessory saints; Baroque Neapolitan painting; Historicized portraiture; Counter-Reformation images.*

Resumo: *A representação de santos foi um aspeto central da produção artística da Nápoles Barroca. Tanto artistas locais como estrangeiros a viver no reino, especializaram-se na execução de retratos historicistas de intercessores populares como São Januário, Santa Ágata e Santa Lúcia. Simon Vouet, Artemisia Gentileschi, Jusepe de Ribera, Guido Reni, entre outros, dedicaram as suas carreiras à retratística de santos, sendo as suas obras colecionadas por mecenas napolitanos. O facto dos mais celebrados pintores em Nápoles se dedicarem à criação de imagens devocionais de santos distinguia a cidade de outros centros artísticos. Este artigo analisa a devoção a mártires e santos em Nápoles durante a Época Moderna e como a prática religiosa local criou uma forma particularmente eficaz e naturalista de representação de personagens sagradas, particularmente de virgens mártires da Época Paleocristã. Adicionalmente, este* paper *pretende contribuir para a compreensão de como os gestos e representações específicos dos santos se tornaram uma característica distintiva da arte religiosa napolitana.*

Palavras-chave: *Santos intercessores; Pintura do Barroco Napolitano; Retratística historicista; Imagens da Contrarreforma.*

1. EARLY MODERN NEAPOLITAN DEVOTION TO MARTYRS AND SAINTS

Since the earliest days of Christianity, martyrs have been central to the institutional development and perpetuation of the Church's values: violent martyrdom narratives of self-sacrifice and ultimate triumph have effectively inspired dedication among the faithful. While

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devotion to saints overall has shaped the Church's history and practice in various ways, the contributions of martyrs were especially important in the years following the Council of Trent (1545-1563), which reaffirmed the status of holy persons and the use of their images as devotional aids. The Tridentine decree, «On Invocation, Veneration, and Relics of Saints», directed bishops to teach that martyrs and saints, their images, and their bodies, were all deserving of adoration[1]. Their cults were revived or strengthened, and accompanying rituals, practices, and objects associated with medieval devotional culture were popularized anew: sacred drama (*sacra rappresentazione*), hagiographies, and the acquisition of relics and display in reliquaries made for both domestic chapels and public houses of worship. Martyrs were especially important in Tridentine claims to religious authority, as they were valuable models of piety during an era characterized by religious warfare and theological disputes. In Baroque Naples, a profoundly devout place that was often called the most faithful of cities «la Fedelissima», dedication to saints was unmatched in Catholic Europe (Fig. 1). This paper seeks to analyze how the widespread popularity of historicized sacred portraiture in Naples reflected the city's dedication to its intercessory saints, and how the Neapolitan industry of painting was largely shaped by these religious values.

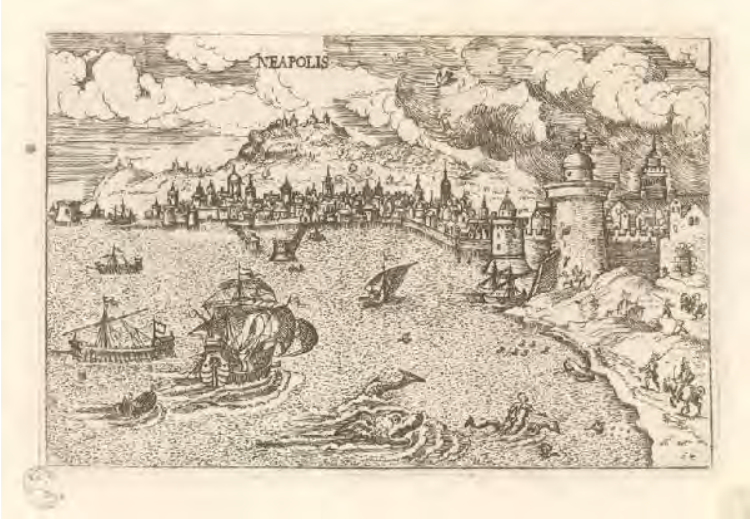

Fig. 1. *Pianta di Napoli,* Pietro Miotte (attr.), c. 1643, 11.6 cm x 7.7 cm, Civiche Raccolte Grafiche e Fotografiche — Civica Raccolta delle Stampe Achille Bertarelli (Milan)

Naples had more than thirty patron saints by the end of the seventeenth century. Cults dedicated to intercessory saints were revitalized during the turbulent century after the Tridentine Council due to political upheaval, natural disasters, and epidemics. In addition to public acts of worship and deference such as feast day celebrations and church decoration, private collectors filled their homes with images of saints and martyrdoms. As Neapolitan

[1] O'MALLEY, 2013: 244.

printing and publishing expanded in the first half of the seventeenth century, the best painters, draftsmen, and engravers were engaged to produce new images of holy persons. The city, which in 1625 made Saint Patricia its main co-patron along with Saint Januarius, added at least six more official protector saints in the century following Trent[2]. Images of both saints interceding on behalf of the Neapolitan population were common—such as in *Saint Januarius Interceding to the Virgin Mary, Christ and God the Father for Victims of the Plague* (c. 1656, Naples, Museo di Capodimonte) by Luca Giordano, executed around 1656 as an ex-voto in gratitude for the end of the disastrous epidemic (Fig. 2). As the Giordano and other paintings indicate, and as Jean-Michel Sallmann has argued, while the Neapolitan faithful community experienced both local and more general conflicts in the post-Tridentine period, the role of ancient and medieval saints fundamentally shifted as they were removed from their lofty heights and embraced more directly as intercessors[3].

Fig. 2. *Saint Januarius Interceding to the Virgin Mary, Christ and God the Father for Victims of the Plague*, Luca Giordano, c. 1656, 400 x 315 cm, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte (Naples)

Januarius and Agatha were not the only celebrated martyrs of Naples: local churches boasted thousands of relics, including the blood, teeth, hair, and bone fragments as cataloged in *Napoli sacra*, Cesare d'Engenio Caracciolo's 1623 guide to Neapolitan holy sites. The relics became the basis for a non-localized determination of sanctity that allowed the city to bring martyrs into its pantheon of patron saints, even if they had no geographical ties to the region.

[2] The saints were: Thomas Aquinas (1605), Andrew Avellino (1622), Francis di Paola (1625), Dominic (1641), James of the Marches (1647), and Anthony of Padua (1650). Saint Francis Xavier was added in 1654, just before the devastating plague epidemic of 1656. COPELAND, 2015: 113-114.
[3] SALLMANN, 1994: 49.

Through its dedication to enfolding the relics and intercessory legends of saints within the city, Naples became a site associated with martyrs, though relatively little sacred blood was shed locally. By absorbing the blood of martyrs and inextricably linking their sacrifice to the city's survival during difficult times, Naples's status as a massively scaled reliquary was established. Post-Tridentine building and decorative programs to house newly obtained or translated relics ensured that the early martyrs would remain fresh in the minds of local devotees. The sumptuous Treasury Chapel of Saint Januarius, built to house the liquefying blood of the saint, was approved in 1527 and constructed from 1608-1646. Naples's claim to sanctity is illustrated in the Treasury's status as property of the city, not the Catholic Church, which was achieved through a series of papal bulls on the subject.

The continued popularity of Januarius and other early Christian saints in Neapolitan society demonstrate a uniquely intimate relationship between past and present, the city and its protector saints, and the melding of civic and religious identity. For example, during several early modern outbreaks of plague, especially the 1656 epidemic that killed about half the inhabitants of the city, saints were called upon to intervene on behalf of the overwhelmed populace. Martyrs, who sacrificed their lives for their faith, and virgins, who represented «uncorrupted» bodies during the plague, were particularly important intercessors. Saints such as Agatha, Lucy, Barbara, and Catherine of Alexandria who combined the virtues of martyrdom and virginity were thus doubly praised, and even more so because they had the added prestige of time: their ability to aid the populace in times of strife had established histories[4]. As Helen Hills has argued, early Christian female virgin martyrs held particular appeal for post-Tridentine audiences, as their gender and sacrifice were both keys to their holiness[5]. They became the subject of both large and small-scale image production, such as Francesco Guarino's *Saints Mary Magdalene, Catherine of Alexandria, Catherine of Siena, Lucy, and Dorothy*. This painting, of small dimensions (39.2 cm x 26.6 cm) and executed on copper was likely included among a trove of objects kept in a domestic interior, as many of the Neapolitan probate inventories describe similar items (Fig. 3). The saints depicted in Guarino's painting were well-known to Neapolitan audiences; three of them (Lucy, Dorothy, and Catherine of Alexandria) were virgin martyrs with established cults in Naples.

As pictures of saints—especially early Christian ones—continued to be popular among Neapolitan audiences, the Church sanctioned a series of publications that lent further institutional support to the veneration of holy persons. In 1583, the first edition of the *Martyrologium Romanum*, or the Church's official calendar of saints according to their feast day, was published. It would be revised and reprinted three times over the next fifty years, most famously by Cardinal Caesar Baronius, whose meticulous scholarship and elimination of implausible entries aimed to bring the veneration of martyrs under institutional control.

[4] ROWE, 2011: 214.
[5] HILLS, 2008: 153.

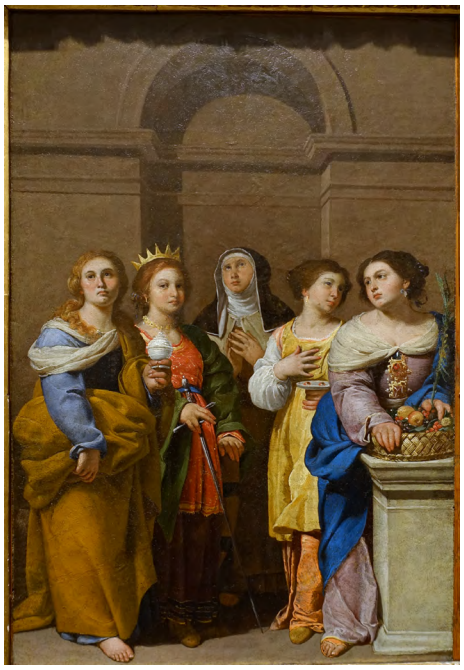

Fig. 3. *Saints Mary Magdalene, Catherine of Alexandria, Catherine of Siena, Lucy, and Dorothy*, Francesco Guarino, c. 1640-1645, 39.2 cm x 26.6 cm, University of Texas Blanton Museum of Art (Austin)

By 1584, Pope Gregory XIII claimed historical authenticity (*ad fidem historiae)* for the *Martyrologium* and required its use throughout the church[6]. Images of saints and biblical models of heroic virtue were in demand throughout early modern Europe but retained special significance in territories under the rule of the Spanish Habsburgs, who controlled Naples from 1553 until the end of the eighteenth century. As self-appointed leaders and defenders of the Catholic faith, the Habsburgs monarchs promoted ritual devotion to saints through images, biography, and festival culture[7]. In Naples, a monarchial culture centered on Catholicism and loyalty; local dedication to intercessory saints was thus supported by the ruling viceroys[8].

2. ARTISTIC MOBILITY AND THE EARLY MODERN TURN TOWARD REALISM IN PORTRAITURE

While the saint portrait remained a consistent mainstay in domestic settings, developments in the broader field of portraiture affected the compositional style and manner of representation in single-subject devotional pictures. All the technical and aesthetic developments of Renaissance and Baroque portraiture applied, especially the turn toward realism and individualism. Prior

[6] GUAZZELLI, 2012: 67-110.
[7] GONZÁLEZ GARCÍA, 2015: 195-218.
[8] CUMMINS, 2015: 43-64.

to the mid-sixteenth century, saints were presented in both painting and print as nondescript and universal, their identification communicated to the viewer by a canonical upturned gaze and the inclusion of specific attributes. However, a marked shift in representation occurred during the early sixteenth century, when attributes largely fell away as artists executed more focused, cropped images of saints with individualized features, often featuring easily recognizable studio models. The portrait then operated doubly as a representation of a living person while channeling the power of the divine long-deceased saint, lending the secular subject a sense of authentic devotion. Martyrs were often distinguished by subtle signs hinting at the torture they experienced or the inclusion of a single meaningful attribute, such as Agatha's bloodstained clothes, or a fragment of Catherine's wheel.

An examination of the transactional history of Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1656) presents another example of the value of historicized sacred portraiture. In a 1635 letter, Gentileschi offered a small, half-figure picture of *Saint Catherine of Alexandria* to her client Andrea Cioli, the secretary of Ferdinando II, as gratitude for the kind reception she received at the Grand Duke's court[9]. This gesture is remarkable in two ways: one, as a demonstration of the value of Artemisia's direct artistic output, and two, for the choice of subject matter, a non-narrative depiction of an early Christian female martyr saint. Artemisia's language in her letter («by my own hand») echoes those of male artists such as Peter Paul Rubens, whose paintings were often valued by how much he personally intervened in their execution. In addition, her choice to offer an image of a half-figure female saint for use as a political gift illustrates the power of the image type. Additionally, many famous collectors in Gentileschi's Neapolitan milieu prioritized images of female saints. These and other archival examples are challenging the existing art-historical assessment of Italian Baroque paintings of female saints as mere pretty pictures, examples of erotic performance, or models of gendered piety. As objects of exchange and cultural capital, single-subject devotional-sized images of virgin martyr saints were likely considered more valuable by early modern artists and their audiences than previously considered[10].

Gentileschi was closely associated with Simon Vouet (1590-1649), a French painter and draftsman, who was active in Rome, Genoa, and Naples from 1612 to 1627. Primarily known for introducing Italian portrait conventions and painting techniques to France, Vouet was also influential in the development of early seventeenth-century portrait painting in Italy. When Vouet arrived in Naples four years after Caravaggio's death, he painted several examples of half-length single-figure portraits of saints that demonstrated his ability to master the lessons of both Caravaggio and Guido Reni. In his *Saint Sebastian*, Vouet fills the canvas with the saint's upper half in a standard half-figure (*mezza figura*) portrait format. He emphasizes the saint's humanity rather than his sanctity, depicting him as an approachable and straight-

[9] CHRISTIANSEN, MANN, 2001: 330.
[10] Recent scholars have recognized this in their analyses of Neapolitan Baroque painting, particularly LOCKER, 2015 and MARSHALL, 2016.

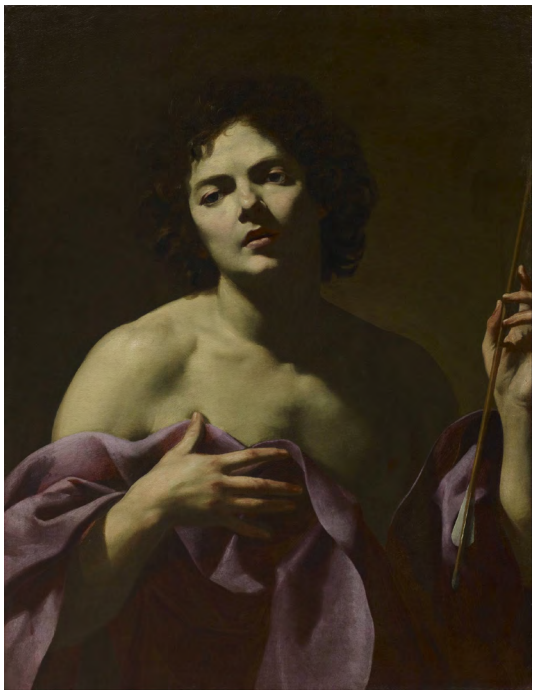

Fig. 4. *Saint Sebastian*, Simon Vouet, c. 1625, 95.9 × 73.7 cm, Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation at the Museum of Fine Arts (Houston)

forward object of devotional practice (Fig. 4). He also painted several known portraits of his family members in this same format, some of whom he depicted as virgin martyrs, such as *Ursula da Vezzo as Saint Catherine of Alexandria* (c. 1620, Private Collection). Simon Vouet's portrait style influenced the Neapolitan Baroque artists to such an extent that some of their paintings were attributed to Vouet in early publications, such as Francesco Fracanzano's *Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, a martyr portrait that was later given to Guarino before being attributed to Fracanzano. That both Vouet and Artemisia Gentileschi found receptive audiences in Naples (to the extent that work of contemporaries and followers were often mistaken for their own) indicates the mobility and widespread appeal of their manner of depicting sacred figures.

3. HISTORICIZED SACRED PORTRAITURE IN NAPLES

As Gérard Labrot and Antonio Delfino have argued, Neapolitan collections of painting in the seventeenth century demonstrated a strong preference for religious subjects[11]. Based on the probate inventories published and analyzed by Labrot and Delfino, it appears that many images

[11] LABROT, DELFINO, 1992: 35.

in private collections were portraitlike pictures of early saints and martyrs, such as Januarius, Sebastian, Agatha, and Lucy. Painted by renowned local artists including Bernardo Cavallino, Francesco Guarino, and Massimo Stanzione, or artists who came to Naples, such as Artemisia Gentileschi, Guido Reni, Simon Vouet, and Domenichino, images of historical sacred figures were a major collecting area in Baroque Naples. This paper posits that the devotional portrait's size and dimension, as well as the widespread appeal of its subject, allowed it to function not only as a religious object but also as a social and political one. For example, the female virgin martyr portrait was commonly used in courtly gift exchanges in the early modern period, a popular practice in Naples during the seventeenth century. Known as *per via de la moglie*, the trading of paintings and other gifts for favors from the Spanish Viceroy's court demonstrates the diplomatic significance of paintings among the Neapolitan elite[12]. Devotional paintings of saints would have been useful in these transactions, considering their size as well as Neapolitan preference for the image type.

Simon Vouet's positive reception among Neapolitan collectors, as well as Artemisia Gentileschi's success in the city, depended upon the appeal of their religious portrait styles. Vouet and Gentileschi were among the first artists to graduate from depicting «teste di santi» as generic figures lacking distinguishable features to characters that occupy the entirety of the canvas and gesture animatedly, even when tightly confined. Gentileschi's martyr self-portraits address the viewer to varying degrees, but their faces and their gestures demonstrate their engagement and their willingness to act. Vouet's portrait of Ursula da Vezzo might be compared to his portrait of Artemisia Gentileschi from 1623 in which he depicts the artist holding a palette and brushes in her left hand and a stylus in her right. Vouet's portrait of Gentileschi is not only alert but seems poised to act, seemingly pushing forward from the lower right side of the canvas with her palette. The women in saint portraits, such as Bernardo Cavallino's *Saint Catherine of Alexandria* (c. the late 1640s, Barber Institute of Fine Arts), are also not depicted simply holding the instruments of their torture or death but grasping them with authority (Fig. 5). Cavallino, who painted around twenty known religious and allegorical smaller scale portraits of women, demonstrates another particularly Neapolitan characteristic in his S*aint Catherine of Alexandria*, a tension in the hands that demonstrates an active, rather than passive role of the martyr. Her act is psychic, physical, and it is procedural: the martyr holds her palm as one might grasp a stylus as if she were inscribing her own martyrdom story on her would-be wheel of torture. Her wrist rests casually on the spiked wheel, which supposedly shattered at her touch, demonstrating her ability to control the manner and moment of her death.

Picturing saints with authority became a defining characteristic of Gentileschi's saints, including *Saint Lucy* (c. 1650, Private Collection), a painting recognized as a collaborative effort

[12] LOCKER, 2015: 25.

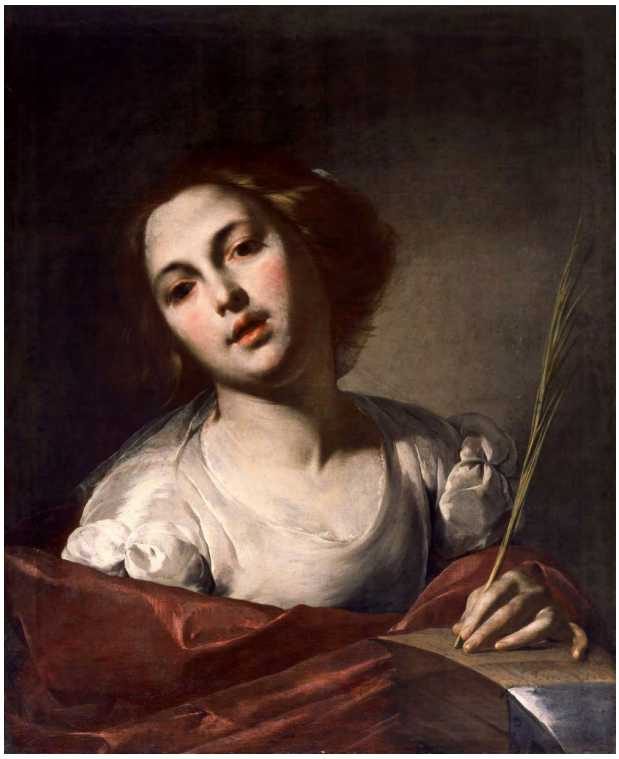

Fig. 5. *Saint Catherine of Alexandria,* Bernardo Cavallino, c. 1645-1649, 71.7 x 59 cm, Barber Institute of Fine Arts (Manchester)

between Gentileschi and her workshop assistant and follower Onofrio Palumbo[13]. As Mary Garrard has pointed out, active hands were a distinguishing quality of Artemisia Gentileschi's work, which contrasted with the idle and soft women's hands painted by her father, Orazio[14]. Sweet, soft representations of women's hands—associated in early modern portraiture with idleness, beauty, and leisure—are notably absent from female saint pictures painted by artists in Gentileschi's Neapolitan circle. For example, in Massimo Stanzione's *Saint Agnes* (c. 1640, Pio Monte della Misericordia), the young saint who was believed to have been martyred in Rome under Emperor Diocletian in 304, Massimo Stanzione depicts the young martyr focused upward with her left hand placed firmly atop the head of lamb at her side, her main identifying attribute in pictorial representations. The gesture is unusual but definitive: her fingers spread; she seems to shield the lamb's eyes while also limiting its ability to move. In her right hand, she holds her martyr's palm pressed against the stone ledge like an artist's tool, such as a paintbrush or a chisel. It is as if she is poised to carve Stanzione's monogram, which he has included on a vertical section of the ledge under the lamb's foot, next to Agnes's palm.

[13] LATTUADA, 2017: 207.
[14] BAL, *ed.,* 2006.

Jusepe de Ribera, who ran a successful workshop in seventeenth-century Naples rivaled only by Massimo Stanzione, also specialized in single-figure pictures of saints. Meanwhile, Ribera demonstrated his own ability to render lifelike pictures of historical subjects by specializing in religious historicized portraiture, as demonstrated in his pictures of *Saint Jerome* (c. 1639, Cleveland Museum of Art), *Saint Simon* (c. 1630, Madrid, Museo del Prado), and others. Credited as one of the major painters in Naples to apply his skills to the naturalistic representation of religious and historical figures while rejecting existing iconographic frameworks, Ribera imbued his pictures of saints and philosophers with an unprecedented liveliness and individuality. The positive reception of his *mezza figura* pictures led members of Ribera's workshop to specialize in scaling the sizes of the canvases and producing them in larger numbers for a wider audience.[15] Though Ribera was known primarily for painting male subjects, some of his assistants such as Hendrick van Somer and Giovanni Ricca focused on depicting female heroines, such as a *Saint Catherine of Alexandria* (c. the 1630s, Torino, Palazzo Madama), currently attributed to Ricca by Giuseppe Porzio. The success of Ribera's workshop and the output of his assistants, many of whom concentrated their efforts on painting historicized sacred portraiture destined for private homes, demonstrates the popularity of the image type among Neapolitan collectors.

CONCLUSION

As the site of one of the first major European outbreaks of syphilis, volcanic eruptions, and several plagues, early modern Naples was known for its fervent devotion to its more than thirty patron saints, many of whom were early Christian saints. Virginity and martyrdom were celebrated as the highest expressions of faith in a city in which the diseased and deceased were a near-constant presence in public spaces, such as the crowded Largo Mercatello during the plague of 1656. Neapolitan literature and imagery often celebrated virginal bodies in contrast to the outwardly syphilitic bodies of the infected; cleanliness became associated with physical purity and chastity while dying a graceful death was likened to the martyr's courage in the face of suffering and torture. The reflection of societal concerns in preoccupation with individual bodies and their holiness, notably raised by Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger*, was particularly foregrounded in the sacred culture of plague-ravaged Naples. As locals sought intercession from saints Agatha, Rosalia, Lucy, and other early Christian virgin martyrs whose cults greatly intensified in sixteenth—and early seventeenth-century Naples, pictures of the saints were widely collected by families that filled their homes with pictures of holy persons. The popularity of these images led to the development of a uniquely Neapolitan subgenre of

[15] MARSHALL, 2016: 58-59.

portraiture in which saints were depicted with a heightened sense of naturalism, sensuality, and grounded specificity. Such images were psychologically complex and painted by some of the most successful painters who originated from or worked in the city of Naples.

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