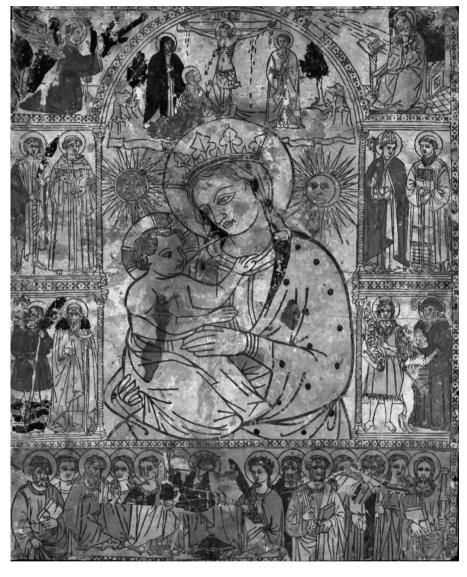# INTRODUCTION: ART, ICON, PRINT   ॐ

> The best-known print in early times was certainly the miraculous woodcut
> of Forlì in northeastern Italy that became known as Our Lady of the Fire.
> It is the subject of the earliest monograph on a printed picture . . .
> Giuliano Bezzi's *Il Fuoco Trionfante*, printed in 1637 at Forlì. . . . By
> 1636 eighteen thousand scudi had been spent to complete a charming
> chamber [in the cathedral to house the Madonna of the Fire] about
> twenty-five feet square under a cupola fifty feet high – the world's first and
> still handsomest print room.
>
> A. Hyatt Mayor, "The First Famous Print"[1]

The woodcut known as the Madonna of the Fire (Color Plate I) was never kept
in a print room. Nailed to a wall in a schoolteacher's house in Forlì early in its
history, in 1428 this image of the Madonna and Child surrounded by other
saints and holy scenes was taken into the city's cathedral after surviving an
accidental but devastating fire at the schoolhouse – an event that was under-
stood by the local population as a miracle. This print remains in Forlì's
cathedral today, preserved in a tabernacle over the altar in the chapel dedicated
to it, so for all we know of its existence, the woodcut was seen and stored in
either a domestic or ecclesiastical setting. But A. Hyatt Mayor, the mid-twenti-
eth-century curator of prints at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, makes clear
through his use of hyperbole one of the longstanding tensions in the discussions
of this print.[2] As a work of art, displayed in the modern museum; a printed
image, kept in a cabinet of pictures produced with a printing press and other
works on paper; and a cult icon, the focus of organized communal religious
devotion; the Madonna of the Fire occupies the intersection of three potent

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Color Plate I. Madonna of the Fire. Cathedral of Santa Croce, Forlì, Italy.
Photo: Liverani

categories of manufactured things: the nexus of aesthetics, technology, and religion. This triple ambivalence makes the Madonna of the Fire both an uncomfortable and a riveting subject for an art historian.

This is of course not to say that the overlapping categories of art, icon, and print have been neglected by art history, though they have usually been studied in pairs. Bartsch's figure of the *peintre-graveur*, the artist who paints and also makes prints which are therefore also art works, on the one hand, and the concept of the reproductive print, ever a second-hand copy of a more illustrious

original, on the other, were really different sides of what has been a long-standing debate about the status of the printed picture as a work of art. Recent studies, including my earlier work on Raphael and Marcantonio Raimondi, have sought to demonstrate that some Renaissance prints, even when not engraved by a painter, were indeed works of art.[3] Other scholars have emphasized the prints that functioned primarily as means of visual communication; designated by the period term *imago contrafacta*, these prints served primarily as bearers of information.[4]

Considerations of printing in the service of religion also have a distinguished historiography. Elizabeth Eisenstein argued in her groundbreaking 1979 book, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, that the Protestant Reformation was possible in part due to print's ability to effect a broad and timely dissemination of texts and images.[5] More recent scholars have reversed the equation to suggest that Reformation practices developed a reading public for printed texts and have extended the analysis to England and France.[6] If the effects of Luther's 1522 New Testament have been long studied, recent discussions of the King James Bible have suggested that the motivations behind that 1611 printed English translation were part of the newly ascended James I's plan "to establish a degree of religious uniformity in his kingdoms."[7] Beyond these studies, the uses of early European printed pictures in religious devotion have recently been explored by scholars including Rainer Schoch, Peter Parshall, David Areford, and Walter Melion. These and other scholars have focused their attention on the relationships between print and early modern religion – even if the study of print and the cult icon per se has not been extensively undertaken, and recently indeed undercut as what Michael Cole and Rebecca Zorach called an "abstracted, 'chastened' image."[8]

Furthermore, Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood have highlighted late-fifteenth-century prints, such as the *Madonna in the Robe of Wheat Ears*, which bear self-referential inscriptions stating, in this instance, "The image is the image of Our Beloved Lady when she was in the temple" [*Das bild ist unser lieben frauen bild als sie in dem tempel war*]. Prior to print, according to Nagel and Wood, handmade objects could be part of an unending substitutional chain of objects in which every one was interchangeable with any other, all of them referring ineluctably to a remote origin.[9] During the course of the fifteenth century, this perfect interchangeability was rendered impossible by print's specificity and the type of self-conscious captioning exemplified by the inscription on the *Madonna in the Robe of Wheat Ears* woodcut: if a painted copy of a Marian icon could be a substitute, in Wood's words, "effectively identical to the others," a woodcut of that icon printed around 1500 in Pforzheim in southwest Germany "does not quite dare to offer itself as such a token [of substitution]. . . . Print converted devotion into an antiquarian project."[10] In this way the chain of substitution was broken by print during the fifteenth century, after which instead of being "substitutive," works became

"performative," with their discrete moment of origin arising from their maker's productive performance. Rather than focusing on this cataclysmic role, this study looks at Forlì's Madonna of the Fire as a case of an early-fifteenth-century print, which as an icon, subscribes exactly to the strategy of substitution: the exact date of its material facture is hardly of any importance to its early viewers compared to its potent link to other Marian icons and ultimately to Mary herself.

This brings us to art and the sacred image, an issue that is especially vexed in Italian Renaissance art, ever since Jacob Burckhardt's mid-nineteenth-century characterization of the Italian Renaissance as a secular phenomenon. For sacred art to function, Burckhardt wrote in the *Cicerone:* "The religious element can only assert itself by claiming absolute sway. In itself a negative quantity, it shrinks to nothing when brought into contact with the profane; and when profane elements are purposely introduced into art the picture necessarily ceases to be religious."[11] Thus, early Renaissance art with its depiction of details from daily life in biblical narratives became, in Burckhardt's influential view, essentially removed from religious concerns.

If Aby Warburg's expansive scholarship on, for example, ex votos in fifteenth-century Florence refocused art historical attention on sacred images,[12] a pair of influential studies published around 1990 continued to emphasize a clear distinction between art and icon in the period roughly between the early fifteenth and early eighteenth centuries, the time frame of my book. David Freedberg's *The Power of Images*, first published in 1989, provided a provocative analysis of "powerful images," both religious and erotic across an extensive chronological span – but insisted in its very first sentence that, "this book is not about the history of art."[13] The following year, Hans Belting's study, *Bild und Kult*, posited a rupture in which the icon "lost power" at the Reformation, when a picture was seen as unacceptably imprecise compared to the literal and therefore authentic word of God. "Into [the image's] place steps *art*," writes Belting, with its concomitant emphasis on aesthetic experience. Though Belting acknowledged that "there is no such thing as a historical caesura" and suggested that in Catholic Italy at least a "double view of the image" as both "receptacles of the holy" and "expressions of art" could coexist even after the Reformation, the 1994 English translation of his book was subtitled, "a history of the image before the era of art."[14]

In the past decade, art historians have taken up the challenge to nuance the overstated concept of a clean break between sacred images and art in the early modern period. Some have, for instance, worked on clarifying how the role of the altarpiece changed in the aftermath of Luther to respond to new religious conditions both north and south of the Alps[15] and re-examined early modern iconoclasm and its aftermath.[16] Other scholars have shifted focus to explore the suggestion Belting had left hanging: that in early modern Italy a painting or sculpture could be both a work of art and an object meant for religious devotion.

Rather than positing a replacement of one type of thing for the other, one could study, "the sacred image in the age of art," as Marcia Hall put it in the title of her 2010 study. Thus, my book joins the growing literature on sacred images in early modern Italy by Hall and others.[17] Taken together, this scholarship promises a new and subtler understanding of the double work of the sacred image, which in Hall's words, "serves two masters, art and the Church."[18]

In my focus on a sacred, printed, work of art, I am answering Paul Hills's call to question art history's seemingly natural categories.[19] The Madonna of the Fire exceeds any single paradigm of art or icon or print; this study therefore embraces the intersections between them. Yet Forlì's Madonna of the Fire is a signal object for scholarly analysis, not only because it simultaneously calls into consideration all three categories of art, icon, and print, but also because it compels us to interrogate what art history can and in some cases should do. For far more than a master painting, for example, the Madonna of the Fire is recalcitrant in responding to the traditional approaches of art history. In a discipline that has centuries-deep roots in the study of the creator, the great artist's biography, this work's maker is now unknown and unnamed even in its earliest surviving descriptions. Italian Renaissance art history has its long favored locales, but this study is focused not on Florence, Rome, or Venice, nor even the cultured courts of Urbino or Mantua, but rather a small city southeast of Bologna. Forlì swung between Ghibelline commune to papal state, spending most of the three centuries between the building of the school in which the print first hung to the completion of the chapel in which it remains enshrined today in a state of war. Historian Eric Cochrane called Forlì the "most misgoverned" of the chronically misgoverned cities of the Romagna.[20] This bloody and chaotic history meant that Forlì could not provide the political and social stability enjoyed by Florence, for example, which renders distinguished artmaking possible: indeed its most famous native artist, Melozzo da Forlì, spent most of his career outside his home town.

Finally, two already mentioned characteristics of the Madonna of the Fire would seem to position it on the margins of art historical inquiry. First, the Madonna of the Fire is not a painting but a print. Art theory and practice long excluded printmakers from the official academies of art and placed history painting at the top of a still powerful hierarchy of media;[21] in parallel, art history has relegated the study of printed things into what sometimes remains a highly specialized and insular subspecialty. Even within traditional print connoisseurship, which prizes pristine early impressions of engravings or etchings, it is a soiled, hand-colored woodcut with a damaged bottom edge. Second, the Madonna of the Fire was never really a quintessential museum piece, but rather first an object of pious attention, and then the center of a Christian local cult. Mayor's hyperbole was part of a rhetorical maneuver working against this grain in order to embed his discussion of the Madonna of the Fire and its ecclesiastical environment into a conventional art historical discourse based on

the twentieth-century museum and its practices. But the Chapel of the Madonna of the Fire is not a print room, nor any part of the institution of the modern museum. Nor is the print on museological display there: rather, it remains covered in its eighteenth-century tabernacle, only visible for feast days, such as the Novena dedicated to the Madonna of the Fire in late January and early February each year.

Art historians have generally followed Mayor's impulse, framing the analysis of the Madonna of the Fire with traditional questions. Most persistently, we have asked when it was made: given the date of the fire of February 4, 1428, this woodcut figures prominently in discussions about the earliest single-sheet woodcuts in Europe, often in blatantly nationalistic terms. Lionello Venturi, for example, first published the woodcut in 1903 in the hope that "the belief that Italian woodcuts arose from German ones . . . be destroyed from now on."[22] Art historians have also worked to attribute this anonymous woodcut to a named master. Sergio Fabbri recently suggested that the fifteenth-century Bolognese painter, Michele di Matteo, is responsible for the Madonna of the Fire, pointing to the "astonishing" similarities between the eyes, nose, mouth, and hair of the printed figure of Mary and the features of the same figure in one of his paintings, now in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Ferrara.[23] Finally, art historians have highlighted the Madonna of the Fire as a formidable example of an early print, one that, as David Areford argued, can "clearly demonstrate the multiple functions of the early printed image."[24]

In this study, I seek to redirect our attention to this print, to turn away from the issue of when and by whom it was made, and from analyses defined by print history. Rather, this book expands the study of the Madonna of the Fire beyond these questions and categories to consider instead a cascade of formative moments in its history, moments in which it was defined, redefined, or reinforced in terms of how it can be understood by past and present communities of faith and of learning.[25] For as an object operating at the node connecting print, art, and icon, the Madonna of the Fire has many origins, many potent moments of making and remaking: when ink was impressed onto paper at a date we now cannot precisely ascertain; when that sheet was recognized by the Forlivesi as miraculous in the aftermath of the schoolroom fire in 1428; when it was taken into Forlì's cathedral and enshrined in various tabernacles and chapels there; when it was studied by scholars, such as Venturi and Mayor; when it or one of its copies was – and is – carried around the city in procession.

One consequence of attending to this continuing cascade is a radical expansion of the chronological span considered: this book discusses, on the one hand, the 1428 fire that established the cult of the Madonna of the Fire and, on the other, a chapel rebuilt and inaugurated in 2009. Yet though similarly expansive temporally, the approach I adopt in this study is not the classic French Annales school emphasis on *longue durée*. After all, a study dedicated to the social life of a singular thing could well be considered a microhistory, and the 1428 fire cannot

be considered anything other than an "explosive . . . event" that literally could "blind the eye with clouds of smoke," to use several of the key phrases Fernand Braudel employed to describe what did not concern the *longue dureé*.[26] Nor does this book take on the quantitative focus and emphasis on regularity that characterize many *longue dureé* studies. Indeed, if the reader at times feels confronted with the opinions and artifacts from many centuries, piled up like the wreckage at the feet of Walter Benjamin's powerless angel of history, it is because in this book, we – like Benjamin's angel – do look backwards toward the past, at many responses to the Madonna of the Fire cascading across more than half a millennium.[27] If in some senses, the Madonna of the Fire is thus similar to what George Kubler termed "prime objects,"[28] we are aided by figures I call "prime viewers," *Ruckenfiguren* like ourselves who through their writing and their actions articulate those many formative moments for us. A. Hyatt Mayor and Napoleon Bonaparte, the alpha and omega of this introduction are the prime viewers closest to our own time; Giuliano Bezzi and Bartolomeo Ricceputi, in the seventeenth century, and Giovanni di Mastro Pedrino in the fifteenth, who return throughout my book, are more remote to us.

Beyond exploring this centuries-long cascade of origins, this book embeds the Madonna of the Fire not within any closed category of similar objects but within a rich miscellany of things and places. This study thus embraces, for example, fifteenth-century baking tongs used to make Eucharistic wafers; medieval and early modern techniques of firefighting; civic processions and printed pictures of them; and a twenty-first-century roadside chapel. The diverse array of things and places brought together in this book is organized into three sections, beginning tightly focused on the material object that is the Madonna of the Fire itself in the first part, "Thing" (a title inspired by Bill Brown's critical theory)[29] and then zooms out into progressively larger fields of analysis. The book's second part, "Emplacement," draws on the work of philosopher Edward Casey and human geographer Yi Fu Tuan in order to examine both the burning house and the cathedral chapel, the architecture destroyed or raised around the Madonna of the Fire.[30] In attending as well to both the liturgical furnishings and devotional rituals that frame that icon, this central part of the book explores both the narrative of the miracle depicted in a lunette painted by Giovanni di Maestro Pedrino and that panel's material status as part of the first altarpiece for the Madonna of the Fire. "Mobilities," the third and final part of the book, uses ideas developed by sociologist John Urry to consider the icon as it is moved through the cityscape in kinetic rituals and as it inspires or provokes the spatial practices of both citizens and foreigners.[31] At the heart of this part of my book is a consideration of Giuliano Bezzi's festive volume, *The Triumphal Fire*, printed in Forlì in 1637.

The book's first part, "Thing," comprises two chapters that consider the Madonna of the Fire, that "first famous print," as a devotional image of Mary, a household object, and then as an imprint, like the seal from a ruler's ring or a

contact relic pressed to a saint's remains, an indexical trace of an authoritative but remote matrix. The third chapter opens the book's next part, "Emplacement," by situating the terrible blaze of February 4, 1428, which the woodcut miraculously survived, within the various associations of fire held by Western Europeans from the fifteenth through the early eighteenth centuries, roughly from the building of Lombardino di Ripetrosa's schoolhouse to the completion of the decoration of the chapel dedicated to the Madonna of the Fire. The fourth chapter considers the issue of household use and display, and the fifth chapter, which grapples with enshrinement, the act of putting an object that had not originally been intended for any specific site – the characteristic of print that Hans Körner called *ortlos* – into a physical and institutional framework that defined and enhanced its sacrality.[32] The last three chapters make up the third part of the book, "Mobilities." This final part opens with Chapter 6, a consideration of the moving icon, carried through the streets and open spaces of the city. Chapter 7 continues with an analysis of the roles of printed books in interpreting the 1636 procession and also the permanent memorial architecture built to commemorate that procession. The last chapter attends to the power of the Madonna of the Fire in and beyond the city limits of Forlì, both by attracting devotees from neighboring territories and by inspiring Marian devotion beyond the city walls. Each of these three sections is governed by a single object: the Madonna of the Fire itself is the focus of the opening pair of chapters that comprise "Thing"; Giovanni di Mastro Pedrino's lunette painting of the February 4, 1428, fire drives the central section, "Emplacement"; and Giuliano Bezzi's printed festival book, *The Triumphal Fire*, the official account of the 1636 procession moving the icon into its new chapel, is the epitome of the concluding chapters on "Mobilities."

The outward zoom of these chapters thus begins with a close analysis of the Madonna of the Fire as a printed piece of paper and then expands to analyze progressively larger physical and ideological sites associated with it: shrine and chapel, church and city, local region and Papal State. In other words, my first and central concern is the Madonna of the Fire, a thing of, as Michael Baxandall put it, "intentional visual interest," consciously made with a pictorial organization that invites and sustains prolonged looking.[33] But I also allow my art historical attention to move beyond that material object, where it resolutely begins, toward the less immediate consequences of that visibility: from the architecture razed or raised around it, to the social and ritual practices it inspires or provokes, and the spatial organization of the city and the polities beyond its walls.

In calling the Madonna of the Fire a "thing," I follow Bill Brown in using a term that "really names less an object than a particular subject-object relationship."[34] The Madonna of the Fire galvanized in its earliest viewers a sense of themselves as citizens of Forlì, a particular group of people in and of a particular place, even as their collective recognition of the woodcut as miraculous elevated it to a cult icon, the focus of organized devotional activity. One of the main

contributions of this book is a case study in civic religion based on analysis of this reciprocal relationship between this print and the people it interpellated into a civic and religious community, this "particular subject-object relationship."[35] Its triple status as art, icon, and print is richly inscribed in the life of the city in which it was, and is, venerated.

This book, then, is my experiment in art writing, though unlike T. J. Clark's recent ruminations on two paintings by Poussin,[36] it chooses as its focus a far more intractable object and the local community it brings together. As a result of this challenging choice, I am compelled to grapple with the issues of what the proper task of art history is, and how to do it. This book thus forms my response that an undated, anonymous, single-sheet woodcut/cult icon is a legitimate target for serious art historical inquiry, as are the places, practices, and community it calls forth. In other words, just as the reading habits of a Fruilian miller tried and executed in 1599 as a heretic can illuminate the intertwining of oral traditions, printed books, and the Catholic Church, so can the Madonna of the Fire throw light on the intersections between art, cult, and icon in early modern Europe as well as the practice of art history in the twenty-first century.[37]

Before turning to the print itself, I would like to close my introduction with an anecdote about Napoleon's response to the Madonna of the Fire of Forlì, which mirrors that of A. Hyatt Mayor with which I began. In March 1796, a young and relatively untested Napoleon was appointed commander of the French army in Italy. Charged with the minor task of diverting the Austrian army from the Rhine front, Napoleon instead made his name as a formidable military leader by defeating both the Piedmontese and the Austrians in northwestern Italy before invading the Papal States in June 1796. His victories there led to the Peace of Bologna, signed June 23, 1796, in which the Pope consented to Napoleon's occupation of Bologna and Ferrara, agreed to give over one hundred art works and fifty manuscripts from the Vatican, and promised to pay a large indemnity. As part of this payment, the seventeenth-century gilt silver candelabra designed by Giovanni Giardini, which had decorated the altar of the Madonna of the Fire in the cathedral of Forlì, were melted down and sent to France.[38] Forlì itself fell to the French in late January 1797 as part of the second wave of attacks on the Papal States. But Napoleon chose not to enter the city until February 4, 1797, the feast day of the Madonna of the Fire.

Napoleon repeatedly displayed not only brilliant military tactics during his Italian campaign but also supremely strategic cultural ones. Fifteen days after entering Forlì, the Peace of Tolentino was negotiated and signed by the Pope's delegates, increasing the Pope's indemnity as well as pressing for the delivery of the works of art and manuscripts already promised in the Bologna armistice. When these works as well as artistic treasures from Venice and Florence arrived in France in July 1798, triumphal processions based on ancient Roman models were staged in Paris.[39] As architectural historian Terry Kirk points out, these public events in Paris had a profound effect on Italian morale: "being for the

first time on the bitter end of such a triumphal procession sharpened a consciousness of the fragility of their cultural heritage."[40] The following year, Napoleon would hold a Festa della Federazione in Rome, taking over no less resonant a place than Piazza San Pietro as the site where "Roman Consuls" ritually pledged their union as a French *départmente*, "amalgamating," to use the official term, with French rule.[41]

In choosing the feast day of the Madonna of the Fire for his entrance into Forlì in 1797, Napoleon co-opted much of that cult icon's aura for himself and France. Instead of the usual civic and religious rituals that regularly took place on February 4 each year, Napoleon marched into the city escorted by a thousand mounted soldiers, instituted his national guard, suppressed various monasteries in the city, and constituted a central administration of the region of Emilia dependent on the Cispadan republic.[42] He gathered together Forlì's elite, including its bishop who had fled to Castrocaro, exhorting them to continue their support of the local population under French rule, and concluding, "I hope you will not oblige me to use force."[43]

But Napoleon had already used soft force in displacing the Madonna of the Fire's feast day with his entrance into the city. He of course was not the first to use this type of strategy: in 1467, Charles the Bold entered Ghent as its duke on June 28, the day of the procession of the relics of Saint Lieven, Ghent's most important local saint. As Peter Arnade points out, choosing that date for the ducal entry was "a special assertion of ducal rulership, a blunt yet magnificent statement that . . . lordly power . . . rested on a basic authority so great that it could displace at will the city's religious calendar and co-opt the sacred power of Saint Lieven."[44] Centuries earlier in Roman Greece, the removal of a conquered city's cult icons was regularly used as, in Susan Alcock's words, "acts of symbolic violence [which] worked effectively to undermine local loyalties, to shatter established relationships of authority and, above all, to weaken any pretense of independence."[45]

If Napoleon pointedly did not remove or desecrate the Madonna of the Fire, his restraint only demonstrates how he understood it as a print and an icon, rather than a printed work of art meant for the modern museum, as A. Hyatt Mayor chose to do. The sculptures, paintings, and drawings gathered during the Italian campaign were meant for the Musée Napoléon in the Louvre. Many of the Renaissance pieces Napoleon took to Paris were altarpieces, cult statues, or relics removed from Italian churches; as Cathleen Hoeniger points out, "once in Paris, [they] . . . acquired a new and dual status, as trophies of war and museum objects."[46] Prints had no place in the Musée Napoléon, so the Madonna of the Fire was not taken. At Forlì, then, Napoleon balanced the symbolic violence in the timing of his entry with his merciful treatment of this local cult icon. In doing so, he displayed his understanding of the range of local practices associated with the Madonna of the Fire, from the rituals he negated to the pious custody of the material object he permitted to continue. It is this full range, this potent cascade and its standing in the history of art, that I explore in this book.