

*Art and Piety in the Female  
Religious Communities of  
Renaissance Italy*

ICONOGRAPHY, SPACE, AND THE RELIGIOUS  
WOMAN'S PERSPECTIVE

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# *Preliminary Overview*<sup>I</sup>

As indicated by the Table of Contents, this study combines a broad sketch with a comparatively narrow, but detailed, analysis of art and piety in female religious communities in Renaissance Italy. This Preliminary Overview highlights key issues as they appear in the main text. Throughout, attention is paid to the functions of artistic products and the ways in which these were central to the aims and objectives of female religious communities. But questions are first raised about the purpose of these institutions and some of the common problems they faced. For, despite their widely varying character, it is possible to identify features these institutions shared in common, some of which also apply to male religious communities.<sup>2</sup>

It is not the purpose of this study to consider why the fluctuating impulse, individual and collective, to develop and sustain female religious communities was so strong during the early modern period. Much attention has already been paid to this.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, the prevalence of this form of religious and social organization often resulted from a complex of factors. In any event, there were many different establishments in Tuscany and Umbria and as the examples in Part One show, their development and evolution varied considerably. It was a lively, even volatile field.



Despite many important variations, the essential features of these communities involved a group of people – women in the establishments considered here – who made an individual commitment to dedicate their lives to God and to the service of their immediate and more distanced societies. This was effected by the maintenance in houses separated from the community to some degree, of a collective life governed by a set of shared rules, rituals, and observances. Almost all religious communities held that much in common. There were, of course, wide variations concerning every aspect: the order followed; the rules observed; dress; the precise vows undertaken; the balance between private devotional activity, and collective religious observance and other activities such as medical and social work; and the extent of separation from the lay community.

The primary official purposes of such communities, then, included the provision of lives of collective service to God and mankind; intercessionary devotional activity; and the demonstrable maintenance, as an example for the community as a whole and as an offering to the Almighty, of a distinct and elevated lifestyle governed by the observance of prescribed rules. Unofficially, but obviously, these communities also performed other functions crucial to their role in society. In particular, they provided a relatively secure and accepted way of life, and livelihood, to a significant number of single women who were as a result not directly dependent on continued support from their extended families.<sup>4</sup>

If those were common primary objectives, it is clear that these communities had a number of important secondary objectives that must be achieved if they were to be successfully developed and sustained. Like all organizations, they needed to ensure financial viability through the recruitment of new members and the retention of sufficient existing members, not only in good order and discipline, but also with as high morale as possible. These objectives, in turn, meant that it was important that these establishments enjoyed good external and community relations so that they were accepted and supported generally, and could successfully project themselves and their activities, particularly to those best able to provide or encourage financial support and new recruits. Similarly and defensively, such

communities needed to avoid attracting political ecclesiastical or community antagonism, and, more importantly, to secure active political, religious, and community support and protection. For all these reasons there was a need for what might now be called a successful promotional strategy.

The field of female religious communities was both competitive and in constant flux. There was a recurrent pattern of communities failing as independent entities and disappearing or being absorbed by rivals. If a community or, indeed, an order were to survive, it had to maintain its independence by resisting absorption by others. While financial viability was a prerequisite, political and ecclesiastical patronage could also be crucial. The significance of this is drawn out in consideration of the foundation of the Franciscan community of Sant'Onofrio in Florence. Equally, one way in which a community might strengthen its position would be by successfully taking over rivals. The response of the Carmelites at Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence to the nearby foundation of the Augustinian community of Santa Monaca offers an example of the degrees to which preexisting communities were prepared to go to obstruct, or at least delay, the emergence of rivals. (This is discussed in Chapter Three.)

These promotional political and community relations issues depended ultimately on the religious community successfully maintaining, and being seen to maintain, the observance of the particular role it claimed and the maintenance of the special elevated rule of life which it espoused. That involved both the superficial – for example, the important issue of a distinct dress or uniform – and more complex cultural issues.<sup>5</sup> In particular, to sustain a collective and to some extent demanding lifestyle required the development and maintenance of a collective culture and identity, so that the members of the community were encouraged and reinforced in their decision to continue to live by the rule. That, in turn, put a premium on establishing, internally and externally, the history, tradition, and myth of the community, its place in a wider religious and ecclesiastical structure, and the elevation of heroic figures who could provide iconic exemplars of the rule chosen: typically the founder, original patron, or early members of the order or, if it was a branch of an order

as was often the case with female communities, its parent.

Texts in the form of chronicles, record books, and *memoriale* often assumed an important role in charting the foundation of individual communities. But frescoed images, sculptural reliefs, painted panels, and three-dimensional funerary monuments combining painting and sculpture (to name but some of the conventual furnishings considered here) also contributed to the sense of history. Detailed consideration is given here to the ways in which a sculpted bas-relief of Maria degli Albizzi at Santa Chiara in Florence was used by later chroniclers to explain and confirm that particular community's foundation and development. The significance of positioning and display of images of the 'founders' is further analysed in the context of Sant'Anna in Foligno (the Beata Angelina) and Sant'Onofrio in Florence (Ginevra dei Bardi).

While later texts such as those associated with Santa Chiara may use images in an attempt to reconstruct an orthodox past, the original motives behind the creation of such images may have been different. As this study will attempt to show, visual references of this kind, their positioning within other decorative schemes in the conventual complex, and (in particular) the extent to which they served the internal and/or external gaze indicate a variety of aims and objectives. The way in which a figure is dressed will give clear indications concerning order and rule. Indeed, in some cases such depictions are revealed as conscious attempts to distinguish the nature of the internal organization. In some instances such as the painting of *St Catherine surrounded by Members of the Dominican Third Order*, which forms the basis of enquiry in Chapter Sixteen, it also seems likely that the intention was to mark a particular period or event in that community's history or development, rather than merely stress the rule it followed.

Special attention is paid here to the varying nature and social makeup of individual communities. The Franciscan complexes of Sant'Anna and Sant'Onofrio are selected as examples of communities established within the same order, but with rather different internal organizations. The former clung to the comparatively relaxed rule of the reg-

ular Third Order under the *Padri conventuali*,<sup>6</sup> the other aspired to the more rigid constitutions of the Observant branch of the Franciscan Order.<sup>7</sup> Yet, in each case it seems that women from aristocratic backgrounds were instrumental in founding the community, and that, for the most part, early members came from the same background. Their blood was so 'blue' that each was individually known as the 'monastery of the countesses'. The nature of the internal organization and the social profile of its membership are accepted here as central issues for consideration in the interpretation of decorations produced for the conventual complex.

Questions are also raised concerning motives operating in the lay community in maintaining or supporting individual communities. It seems likely that the selection of individual communities for the placement of daughters with or without dowries or with or without religious convictions was intricately associated with lay expectations, as well as lay societal and familial circumstances. Placement of a female member of the family in a religious community could significantly ease the financial burden of caring for her, or providing large (and sometimes repeated) dowries for her in the lay community.<sup>8</sup> Such placements, especially when combined with some endowment, also offered spiritual insurance concerning both the temporal condition and the afterlife of those members of the family remaining outside the conventual walls.<sup>9</sup> Specific evidence of this may be found in the late fifteenth-century constitutions concerning prayer at the Franciscan community of Sant'Anna in Foligno.<sup>10</sup> In these, the women are advised to establish a predetermined number of prayers to which they should adhere, except in exceptional circumstances such as illness. At the very least, they were required to include among these three recitations of the rosary; fifteen Pater Nosters in commemoration of Christ's Passion; five in reverence to St Francis, and some offering in consideration of 'quelli che hanno fatto o fanno bene al monastero' (thus, both past and current benefactors).

The orders, then, needed to establish internally a clear and distinct identity and culture, to maintain morale, and to sustain the primary objectives of offering lives of service (frequently based on intercessionary prayer). At the same time, and without

conflicting with aspirations to humility, they needed to project such internal organization externally for the positive purposes of securing political, ecclesiastical, and public support and protection; gaining recruits and financial support (the latter often closely linked to the former); and, defensively, ensuring viability against bankruptcy or takeover.

Against this background what role did artistic productions play? Two-dimensional and plastic art operated in practice in conjunction with many other features such as music, singing and chanting, liturgy and ritual, architecture, habits, and costume.<sup>11</sup> They thus often assumed a number of roles. It is argued here that the role or function of conventual art depended in large part upon the use of the surrounding space and the kind of behaviour expected from the individuals gathered there. Divisions in architectural space are thus examined against the notion not only that varying functions or liturgical requirements played a distinct part in fashioning the content and nature of decorations displayed there, but also that the images themselves regulated activities in these different areas. But, as the detailed analysis of many of the communities selected for consideration here shows, the nature of conventual space and behaviour within it was rarely fixed. There were numerous variations over time. The watershed of the Council of Trent, although much emphasised and subjected to considerable analysis, represents only one period of reform among many in the history of female religious communities in Italy. Each of these resulted in changes to a lesser or greater extent in the internal nature of such institutions, which in their turn influenced the way in which space was organized and used.

Even without response to such external forces, practice within individual communities could vary according to the size and nature of the conventual accommodation. During the early history of many female religious communities individual spaces within the conventual complex often assumed a number of different functions. Although certain areas are now correctly defined in terms of varying activities ranging from devotion to discussion, and eating to sleeping, it may also be the case that during an earlier age, such spaces, individually or in parallel, 'doubled up'. Doubling up could be official

and unofficial, sanctioned through constitutional rule or frowned upon as unorthodox behaviour, and regulated against through individual articles of reform. Thus, devotional activities might legitimately range freely across the conventual complex, although constitutional rules stipulated that certain prayers should only be offered in specific places. The late fifteenth-century ordinations of Sant'Onofrio, for example, stipulate that penitential psalms should always be delivered in the choir.<sup>12</sup> Offices for the dead were likewise to be restricted to the choir, with the exception of a number of quite precisely stipulated times.<sup>13</sup>

Constitutional rules also laid down certain regulations concerning the use of particular spaces for prayer at different times during the day. The women of Sant'Onofrio were, for example, required to remain in their cells and pray between Prime and Terce.<sup>14</sup> And, in one particularly detailed rule, it was stipulated that between 'Paschua di Resur(r)exi infino alla Donna di settembre' (roughly six months of each year), the women should go into the choir to recite penitential psalms after each meal, and that after the sounding of a bell they should return to their cells for contemplation 'overo fare altre comodità del corpo overo exe(r)citio a loro concessi' (presumably allowing for a wide variety of activity).<sup>15</sup> At Nones they were all to gather together in the room 'deputata a lavorare' (an interesting insight to the flexibility in functions of conventual space) and here they were required to read 'qualche libro divoto' for an hour in complete silence. After this time they could talk together, but always using edifying speech ('sempre parlando parole edificatorie') and in praise of the celestial bridegroom ('in laude dello sposo') until Vespers.

Silence was observed in a number of places and at a number of different times as part of an established pattern of decorous behaviour. But it would be a mistake to assume that the thread between behavioural expectations, rules, and practice upon the ground (or, to be more precise, in the corner of the choir, refectory, or cell) remained taut.<sup>16</sup> Reforms drawn up at the time of the Council of Trent and the scandalised reports of visiting inspectors offer ample evidence of 'lax' behaviour behind convent walls.<sup>17</sup> However, even laying such extreme and obvious cases of

deviation from an established or expected norm to one side, it seems clear that traditional interpretations of conventual space and behaviour within it need some revision. Many examples considered here indicate, for example, that discussions and announcements might take place just as easily in the refectory as in the chapter house. Eating was probably not confined to the refectory, either. Why else should it have been thought necessary to draw up rules preventing food being taken out of the refectory?<sup>18</sup> Documentary evidence survives, also, to indicate that the rule of silence was likewise, on occasion, broken. The late fifteenth-century rules drawn up for Sant'Onofrio in Florence, as well as drawing attention to appropriate behaviour in the refectory, also include penalties for those who chatted irreverently or laughed in the choir.<sup>19</sup>

It seems quite clear, also, that many women committed to religious life during the early modern period showed little aptitude and even less vocation for such practice. Instances abound of nuns absconding; novices reneging on their instructions; and postulants requesting that their role in the community should be commuted to the condition of a lay member or servant to the community, rather than proceeding through religious instruction to profession and taking of the veil. One particularly arresting account of this kind concerns Antonia, the daughter of Giovanni 'del valdarno di sopra', who first joined the community of *Mantellate* nuns at Santa Monaca in Florence as a servant.<sup>20</sup> In January 1451/2 she took the habit, assuming the name Sister Apollonia. In December 1455 she apparently fled the monastery by way of the back door. Her excuse was that she had never wished to take part in the ceremony of profession because she did not want to remain in *clausura*. Her subsequent life outside the conventual walls was perhaps not so rosy as she had anticipated. Only a year later she is recorded as dying in the hospital of 'messer Bonifacio'.

Such incidents were no doubt common in many other arenas. Signing up for membership within any kind of institution, and behaviour when once elected or accepted there, depended on many different personal circumstances and external forces.<sup>21</sup> Religious communities (as organizations intent upon the practice of a particular kind of 'activity' or way

of life) faced many of the same problems concerning regulations and actual operation of the 'business' as lay communities intent upon more concrete forms of 'trade'.

While the sociological aspects of conventual life underpin many of the enquiries in Part One, the central aim in later sections is to illustrate that many images hitherto assumed to have been produced for public viewing, as well as many of those with as yet no firm provenance, were in fact commissioned for private gaze within the inner space of a female conventual complex. The overriding intention here is to illustrate how conventual art related to and regulated the space surrounding it. This inevitably requires an exploration of the varying nature and function of conventual space.<sup>22</sup>

Particular consideration is given, for example, in the analysis of Sant'Anna at Foligno to the space traditionally known as 'Angelina's cell'. This area appears to have changed both in scale and decoration as it evolved from the private space of one individual to the corporate space of the community, upon assuming the function of an inner oratory after Angelina's death. The changing function of the space emerges as a key factor in interpretations of surviving decoration there. A slightly different consideration regulates analysis of the evolution in significance of a fresco of the *Annunciation* (Colour Plate I), originally produced by Bicci di Lorenzo and his workshop as one of a number of frescoed images on the wall of an upper chamber at Sant'Onofrio in Florence. In this case, it is argued that it was the decoration itself which played an important part in establishing the character of the surrounding space and controlling or regulating activities there. It is further suggested that the changing function of that space was inextricably linked with the development of the architectural fabric and the internal organization of the community itself.

As the more detailed analysis in Chapter Eighteen indicates, Bicci di Lorenzo's *Annunciation* fresco appears to have been selected for particular attention at the beginning of the sixteenth century, almost a century after its original commission and production. At that time, it seems to have been singled out by papal decree as an appropriate and culminating point of reference during the reenactment of

pilgrimages within the conventual complex. Thus, what was originally deemed appropriate as one of a number of images on one wall in one space within the conventual complex, not only assumed a unique and separate significance, but also exerted a specific influence on the way in which the surrounding space was viewed and used. It seems most likely that the space for which the *Annunciation* image and other scenes were originally produced served first as an internal hall. This was thus an area through which members of the community passed when moving from one part of the conventual complex to another. However, once the *Annunciation* was marked out as different, imbued with significance as a pilgrimage image, the surrounding space assumed quite a different character. No longer a connecting space through which members of the community moved when intent on business elsewhere, it became an area to which individuals came, with the specific intention of assembling there to offer devotions at an altar erected in front of one particular image. As an artistic production the original fresco remained unchanged. But changing attitudes to it influenced both the way in which the space in which it was displayed was viewed and used.

Despite evidence of fluctuations and duplications in the use of female religious space (which are considered in greater detail in Chapter Seven), and changes in the nature or content of decoration (subjected to closer examination in Chapters Six and Eleven), there were many situations where the relationship between space and image remained effectively fixed. It is in this context that the role of art in ritual assumes particular significance. The high altar and its associated imagery was in effect the most significant and central point in the celebration of the Eucharist (at least in an outer, or conventual church). The furnishings of sacristies were, with very few exceptions, essentially concerned with religious celebrations carried out at the high altar. Surviving conventual records also suggest that some activities, such as the confirmation of the nun's espousal to Christ through the ceremonies of profession and taking the veil, not only had fixed points of reference (either to the high altar in the outer conventual church or in the space surrounding the main altar in

the inner church, or nuns' choir), but also required a particular artistic vocabulary.<sup>23</sup>

By way of introduction to such conventual ritual, Chapters Two and Three consider some of the characteristics of female religious communities and the extent to which we may argue that the decorations of their conventual complexes were different. By definition, life within female religious communities was essentially carried on without the presence of men. But, as with male communities, there was throughout an emphasis on corporate activity: praying together at set times, joining together to discuss community matters, eating together, even carrying out the 'disciplina' or self-flagellation together. Postulancy or vestition, and the election of abbesses and mother superiors, were possibly the only ceremonies where individual women assumed a specific significance. Although there is evidence that vestition ceremonies could involve more than one individual, the act of postulancy was specific to one female alone.

On such occasions complex negotiations were normally carried out concerning the conditions under which the postulant was to be accepted into the community. Although a male member of the lay society or a member of the clergy might officiate, any visual record of the event itself tended naturally to emphasise the female rather than the male. It was through such ceremonies that the permanent number of members of the community was maintained and the overall network of female religious houses strengthened. But the event was also of particular significance to the individual female concerned and to her natal family. When works of art were commissioned in celebration of such transactions, it would no doubt have seemed natural that both the female at the centre of the ceremony and her familial connections should take precedence. The painting traditionally entitled *St Catherine as Spiritual Mother of the Second and Third Orders*, but here renamed *St Catherine surrounded by Members of the Dominican Third Order*, is identified as one such example. A detailed explanation of why this painting should be associated with an entrance ceremony and the ways in which it emphasised the significance of the postulant and her family is offered in Chapter Sixteen.

As we shall see, one clear distinction which may be drawn between imagery in female and male religious communities is the emphasis placed in the former on the nun as the spouse of Christ. Precise visual references were also often made to the individual nun's position within the community. Prospective members of a female community experienced a number of changes in dress during the various stages of their acceptance into religious life. The postulant or novice was clearly distinguished from the professed nun, who in taking the veil took part in what was in effect a bridal ceremony.<sup>24</sup> But there were differences also between postulants and novices. In many cases, postulants were not required to wear any kind of official habit. Novices, by comparison, were often distinguished by a slightly less elaborate or refined form of dress. There was a specific spiritual purpose here which is explained in the ordinations drawn up for the 'sisters of penitence' at Sant'Anna in Foligno in the early seventeenth century.<sup>25</sup> According to these, the probationer should wear a 'panno vile et ceneritio' for a whole year in order to show her humility and spiritual willingness to serve St Francis.

A general analysis of the prominence allotted to female figures in decorations destined for conventual complexes underpins many of the individual enquiries raised in this study. In this context, also, distinctions are drawn between the male manipulation of 'public' space through the commissioning of high altarpieces, and independent female action in the patronage of artworks for 'private' areas.

Although considerable attention is paid to internal decorations, it is certainly not the intention here to deny the importance of art in the outer or public church. Although clearly not essential to the celebration of mass, altarpieces could and often did relate specifically to liturgical activities associated with the altar upon which they were displayed. And, most significantly in the context of the present study, altarpieces in the outer or public space could emphasise the standing of the community, indicating its financial viability and/or endowment and protection by wealthy patrons. The commissioning of a prestigious altarpiece served not only to beautify that outer space, but also often to emphasise

a particular *titulus*, whether of side chapel or high altar or the church itself.

There can be little doubt that production of art for public display aided public projection. It not only validated the community's way of life and its members' choice of it, but also encouraged and reassured existing members. At the same time it served the interests of the lay community. Where high altarpiece or subsidiary decorations within the conventual church included references to lay donors through the display of coats of arms, inscriptions, or portraits, such details must clearly have been viewed in terms of the promise of spiritual reward. Visual acknowledgement of those individuals responsible for embellishment of the conventual complex no doubt also encouraged and attracted further support and yet other endowments. Thus, much art production in 'outer' spaces served to promote and protect a community's interests, while at the same time establishing and projecting its doctrinal and political allegiance. It encouraged recruitment and at the same time reinforced the presence and identity of the religious establishment within lay society. Public conventual art, therefore, not only served to project the individual characteristics of a particular religious community, but also contributed in a concrete fashion to public and community relations.

The decoration of the conventual church was not only relevant in terms of promoting the 'outside' or public face of the community; it could also influence everyday life and spiritual experience within the conventual complex itself. There is much evidence to suggest that women in religious communities had only partial access to the decorations in their conventual churches and on some occasions no direct experience of such art at all. However, it seems that many small-scale images in the form of woodcuts and engravings circulated within more private spaces, and that these often referred to or replicated more 'public' imagery. The engraved image of St Catherine of Siena (Hind A.I.66, British Museum, London) is one such example (Figure 1). At least three of the narrative scenes flanking the standing saint in this engraved image can be related to painted panels produced for the Dominican community in Florence during the latter part of the fifteenth century.<sup>26</sup> This



1. Florentine, last quarter of the fifteenth century. *St Catherine of Siena*. Engraving. British Museum, Print Room, Hind A.I.66. Copyright The British Museum.

print thus offered in miniature form a reflection of art produced for public viewing.

Woodcuts and engravings offered considerable possibilities for spiritual instruction, not least as a result of their wide distribution. Whether inserted in spiritual tracts, attached to the wall, or stuck to furniture (including cupboard doors, choir stalls,

and the *predelle* of altarpieces), these images, being cheap and mass-produced, were particularly appropriate for circulation and use within female religious communities. The extent to which ephemeral work of this kind was circulated within such institutions is considered in detail in Chapter Twenty. The heading there – *Less Familiar Asides* – refers as

much to our understanding of the role and function of printed images within the enclosed space of female religious communities, as our knowledge of the circumstances of their production and circulation. It is, however, argued here that such merchandise contributed to the vitality of art displayed in more public spaces. Familiarity with painted or sculpted decorations in the public arena through the medium of mass-produced prints not only imparted a sense of ownership over art in the public realm, but also helped bridge the gap between the world of the cloister and the more public spaces beyond.

Jeffrey Hamburger's suggestion concerning the distinctions that may have been drawn between art produced for different groups of individuals is particularly relevant here.<sup>27</sup> It also finds support in contemporary Italian documentation. Entries in the chronicle of San Giorgio at Lucca, for example, distinguish an altar within the conventual complex which was reserved specifically for novices.<sup>28</sup> After celebration of Mass, when the senior members of the community went to the workroom, the novices went instead with their teacher to offer prayers at their own altar. The differing nature and role of images viewed by novices as opposed to professed nuns are explored in some detail here, particular attention being paid to the decoration of refectory space at Sant'Anna in Foligno. Hierarchical differentiations are traced also in the decoration of a number of spaces allotted to different members of the community at San Domenico del Maglio in Florence. Further distinctions in the nature of the viewing audience are explored through a comparison of the decorations in the large refectory in the Dominican community of San Niccolò at Prato, and the smaller space serving a similar function on the same site known as the 'Refettorio delle Educande'.

Considerable attention has already been paid to the variety of decorations and their differing functions in male space.<sup>29</sup> William Hood, in particular, has considered the extent to which imagery at the Dominican friary of San Marco in Florence related both to the nature of the order, the organization of space within the monastic complex, and the various activities practised there. That such distinctions should have to be stressed in the context of female

space is curious. Female communities have on the whole been excluded from such anthropological enquiries. Many still assume that the inner spaces of female religious communities remained unadorned.<sup>30</sup> Many still argue that for Second-Order nuns and their Tertiary sisters (whether regular or secular) the outer church constituted the main area for conventual decoration, the rest being simplicity and asceticism. In some quarters, the assumption even prevails that following edicts concerning *clausura* as early as the thirteenth century, strict enclosure was effected in all female religious communities during the early modern period.<sup>31</sup> On that basis, given the extent of decorations revealed in inner spaces in this study, one would have to argue for extensive activity on the part of artistic nuns. Much evidence is, in fact, emerging concerning the activities of nuns as artists, particularly during the sixteenth century.<sup>32</sup> Instances cited here indicate that women also may have taken control of decorations within the private spaces of conventual complexes (at least in minor details) at a much earlier date.

To some extent, trenchant views concerning the differences in decoration between outer and inner space depend on distinctions established by early historians such as Giuseppe Richa.<sup>33</sup> When drawing up his survey of churches, monasteries, and convents in Florence shortly before the first suppression of ecclesiastical establishments by the Lorena government at the end of the eighteenth century, Richa often stopped short at the interface between the public space of the outer church and the conventual complex beyond. Strict reforms following the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century played a significant part in erecting both mental and physical barriers between the lay community and the enclosed world of religious men and women. Although on occasion Richa referred (often on the basis of received information, rather than personal experience) to the decorations of the cloister, or to some special image revered by a female religious community and displayed by them in their own private space, he clearly prioritised the decorations of more public spaces.<sup>34</sup> Such mental sets still prevail. In addition, even though it is accepted that small panel paintings and three-dimensional works (both free-standing



sculpture and relief work), and more ephemeral merchandise such as woodblock and metal engraving prints, may have contributed to private devotions within the conventual complex, these are habitually regarded as peripheral to the central spiritual impetus which sprang from prestigious or large-scale work serving religious functions in the conventual church.

The notion that men (and, in particular, male artists) did not penetrate the more private spaces of conventual complexes is clearly in need of some revision. That men habitually entered the private spaces of female religious communities is confirmed by a variety of documentary sources. Julian Gardner's reference to Dominican friars breaking into the confines of a local religious community in Zamora in Spain and subjecting the women there to various insults and physical abuse is only one of a vast number of documented instances both in Italy and elsewhere. One event noted in Dino Compagni's *Cronaca* concerns one of the communities considered in detail in this study. Compagni records how in July 1304, during the conflict between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines, Baschiere de'Tosinghi launched an attack on Florence. Betrayed and fearing a vendetta against members of his family, which included two women established in the Dominican community of San Domenico at Cafaggio (better known as San Domenico del Maglio), Baschiere apparently forced his way into that conventual complex to 'save them'.<sup>35</sup>

Many other sources bear witness to intrusions arising from practical necessity. Evidence survives, indeed, to explain how religious women were expected to behave in the event of visits by lay tradesmen. Thus, the rule of St Clare of Assisi, which was drawn up in 1252, stipulated that when it was necessary for a member of the lay community to come into the conventual complex to carry out work there, the abbess was to place a sentinel at the gate, who was to give access only to the authorised persons. All the other women in the community were to take utmost care that they should not be seen by those who entered.<sup>36</sup>

A surviving register from the Dominican community of San Jacopo di Ripoli in Florence dating to the fourteenth century explains in even greater detail

how the religious women of the community should behave in the event of special licence being given to male workers to enter the conventual complex there.<sup>37</sup> Only the prioress, sub-prioress, and porter and three of the oldest women should be allowed to speak to the workers. The other members of the community were not to communicate with them in any way. The sixteenth-century chronicle of the Dominican community of San Giorgio at Lucca contains similar instructions concerning such intrusions.<sup>38</sup> According to this chronicle, the women there, despite wearing the black habit, did not originally follow a strictly enclosed regime, but opted instead for the less rigid regulations and discipline of the Third Order of St Catherine.<sup>39</sup> Government of the community was shared between the church ('i preti') and the friars of the Dominican Order. It was only during the early years of the sixteenth century, after transferring from the countryside outside Lucca, that they established a stricter regime of enclosure. Yet even at this stage they are described as professing obedience according to the rule of St Augustine, rather than the more rigid rule of St Dominic.<sup>40</sup> At this date, the community's regulations included the following advice concerning the entry of men into the conventual complex:

When it happens that the doctor or workers or other individuals ('altri factori') have to come into the house ('debbono venire in casa'), a bell should first be rung and all the women who are scattered around the house should retire ('si riducano' – literally, 'dwindle away') into some place where they can not be seen, 'and they should take great care' in this.

In essence, the women were advised to make themselves scarce and avoid any kind of eye contact, in the event of physical confrontation. This was presumably what happened when teams of fresco painters were brought in to decorate chapter houses and refectory spaces. Even greater precautions must have been taken when, as is documented in the case of Cosimo Rosselli at Sant' Ambrogio, an artist was commissioned to produce fixed decorations for the dormitory.

The differing nature of decorations in such spaces and the relationship between these and the function of the spaces themselves is not often explored in any



2. Anonymous Italian, ?late fourteenth/early fifteenth century. *Flying Angels and Donor*. Fresco fragment. Nuns' choir, San Niccolò, Prato. Photograph by author with permission from the Ufficio Beni Culturali delle diocesi di Prato and the Soprintendenza per i Beni Artistici e Storici, Florence.

detail. Nor is much made of references to the internal organization and history of individual communities. Yet many publications generally concerned with Renaissance art and decoration contain evidence in support of the hypothesis presented here that internal conventual decorations not only existed in a wide variety of material forms, but were also intimately connected with the specific character of the community and the function of the spaces in which they were displayed. One such example is the admirable survey of San Niccolò at Prato published by Silvestro Bardazzi and Eugenio Castellani.<sup>41</sup> Intent upon reconstructing San Niccolò's history and tracing its evolution from a religious community to an educational institute, these authors present much visual and documentary material concerning its private and public spaces. They also appear to identify an hierarchy of space within the conventual complex itself, distinguishing, for example, the large refectory from that known as the 'refettorio delle educande' and both of these from a third space which currently serves as an eating area for the women still at San Niccolò. However, there is little detailed interpretation of the iconography of individual decorations.

By contrast, considerable attention is paid here to a fresco containing two angels and a kneel-

ing figure in religious clothing which is now displayed in the choir (and therefore inner space of San Niccolò) (Figure 2). Although some effort has been made in the past to attribute and date this image, few questions have been raised concerning its original display or viewing audience; neither has any attempt been made to assess the extent to which it is complete as opposed to a fragment of a larger piece of decoration. If it is a fragment, little real assessment of its significance is possible without reconstruction of the missing parts. Only through reconstructing the whole can one hope to establish more firmly whether or not the image is now displayed in its original position, and the extent to which it is appropriate to that space. As later discussion will show, this image was most probably originally displayed in the outer church and thus served a semipublic function.

Evidence presented here suggests that images displayed in more private space were very different from those on public display. In many cases it becomes clear that they catered specifically to the female viewer and user. In this context, attention turns increasingly to the female state and psyche and the extent to which this differs from the male. Harnessing the maternal instinct of religious women receives increasing consideration in surveys of conventual art. Indeed, evidence mounts to suggest that



3. Gregor Erhart, c. 1500. *Christ Child with Terrestrial Globe*. Polychromed wood. Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg. *Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg*

a virtual experience of the woman's natural disposition to procreate was offered through contemplation of images depicting the Virgin Mary in tender maternal embrace of her child. Active physical engagement in 'nurturing' was also often effected through the care of a naturalistic Christ doll (Figure 3). Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, in noting a number of instances where professed nuns were given such dolls by relatives, argues persuasively for their private use, presumably within the space of individual cells.<sup>42</sup>

Such practice must have offered an important channel for maternal instincts otherwise denied to

women enclosed within religious communities. The specific feast of Christmas offered further possibilities through the arrangement of a stable scene, in which a sculptural model of the Christ child could be removed from its manger, cradled, embraced, changed, and replaced in replication of Mary's actions. It also obviously reflected the contemporary activities of women in the lay world.<sup>43</sup> Klapisch-Zuber also notes the potential of such dolls in assuming the role of surrogate, albeit miniature, spouses.<sup>44</sup> The function and use of such images must, however, have been highly subjective, influenced not least by the age of the girl or woman and the stage reached in her religious induction.

Other images, such as inspirational depictions establishing the foundation myth, worked to strengthen the corporate well-being of the community. Whereas painted images and sculpture catering to the maternal instinct might benefit the emotions and aspirations of the individual, those celebrating the founder or others holding significant office there must, by comparison, have served a broader function. Images of this kind must have encouraged a corporate sense of identity and tradition. Building up the heroic status of the founder as an exemplar, such images assumed a didactic purpose in ensuring collective ownership of the founding myth. At the same time, they reinforced community culture through maintenance of a sense of a dignified and elevated lifestyle.

Thus, while dolls may have been reserved for more individual and private devotion, many other images served a more public function in being placed in an area associated with a particular communal activity. All religious communities required the services and functions of certain spaces beyond the conventual or monastic church for their daily religious practice: for worship, for the discussion of community matters, for contemplation, for work, for communicating with the outside world, for the various stages of acceptance and accommodation of new members, for eating, and for sleeping. Clearly established conventions existed in both male and female spheres concerning the decoration of some of these 'inner' spaces. An obvious example is the Last Supper, which was commonly depicted in the refectory,

both in reflection of the function of that space and in reference to the Institution of the Eucharist – the corporate event that underpinned the establishment and spread of Christianity.<sup>45</sup> Concrete visual reflections of the events associated with that were often offered in the form of a depiction of the Crucifixion or Tree of Life as a background to the Last Supper, or as a separate motif. But, as the analysis of refectory decorations here reveals, there were great variations in imagery deemed appropriate to the physical or communal replenishment of the body. The refectory decorations at Sant'Anna in Foligno and San Niccolò in Prato indicate, in addition, that variations could depend on the internal organization of the community.

As we shall see, there were many areas within the architectural complex of both male and female communities that lent themselves to quite different kinds of imagery reflecting industry, decorous behaviour, self-denial, humility, and obedience. What is drawn out for consideration here is the way in which these different kinds of imagery reflected the nature of the community or distinguished one area, and helped to imbue activities conducted there, even when every day in nature, with the elevated formality of ritual. Particular consideration is given to the way in which the gender of the community's members could influence the iconography of its decorations.

A continuing theme addressed throughout this study concerns the extent to which conventual art production was influenced or restricted by the specific requirements of religious women in cloistered and semicloistered space. Patterns of patronage and the working procedures adopted in the production of art for female religious communities are examined in a variety of ways, particular emphasis being laid on the role of male clergy and middlemen acting in the interests of individual establishments or in the interests of particular orders.

It is frequently argued that nuns' expectations and desires concerning the decoration of their conventual complexes were in most cases filtered through male administrators, clergy, and benefactors. On that view it would seem legitimate to argue that the patronal network and commissioning stipulations depended not so much on the 'niche-market'

desires of the individual female clients, as on the expectations and assumptions of their male counterparts and go-betweens. Many maintain that it is more realistic to view altarpieces and other works of art produced for religious women in terms of male taste. Many argue that it is inappropriate to consider works of art produced for female religious communities as a separate issue at all. Certainly, doubts are raised about evaluating decorations produced for those strictly enclosed in terms of their reflecting developments in contemporary female spirituality. Such work, it is argued, should rather be seen as representing a 'selection of familiar themes from an existing repertoire, rather than an innovative imagery intended for cloistered women'.

In denying the existence of altars within *clausura*, some scholars appear to indicate that it is inappropriate to consider painted panels displayed within the conventual complex as altarpieces. It is argued that nuns in *clausura* would have had little need for such points of reference, given that they only rarely took communion and were apparently satisfied by the sight of the consecrated wafer raised during celebration of Mass in the 'outer' space of the conventual church.<sup>46</sup> Such attitudes clearly call into question the function and nature of altars. But there may be a more profound need to question the kind of methodology adopted in consideration of the nature and function of conventual art. Many contemporary references indicate that the religious woman's spirituality was satisfied in a number of ways other than the physical act of consuming the Eucharistic wafer. One example concerns an altar dedicated to St Jerome in the Dominican community of San Domenico in Pisa. According to inventories drawn up at the time of San Domenico's suppression early in the nineteenth century, the altar of St Jerome was situated at one end of the first dormitory in that conventual complex.<sup>47</sup> This altar, which apparently faced another at the other end of the dormitory ('nella testata'), is described as being embellished at that time by a small painting ('piccolo Quadro') together with its curtain ('sua Tenda') and an old crucifix.

Although many suppression documents refer to internal altars and their decorations, it is often difficult to establish the exact date of such furnishings.