THE CULT OF THE VIRGIN MARY IN MEDIEVAL ITALY

Late medieval Italy witnessed the widespread rise of the cult of the Virgin, as reflected in the profusion of paintings, sculptures, and fresco cycles created in her honor during this period. The cathedral of papal Orvieto especially reflects the strong Marian tradition through its fresco and stained-glass window narrative cycles. In this study, Sara Nair James explores its complex narrative programs. She demonstrates how a papal plan for the cathedral to emulate the basilica of S. Maria Maggiore in Rome, together with Dominican and Franciscan texts, determined the choices and arrangement of scenes. The result is a tour de force of Marian devotion, superior artistry, and compelling storytelling. James also shows how the narratives promoted agendas tied to the city's history and principal religious feasts. Not only are these works more interesting, sophisticated, and theologically rich than previously realized, but, as James argues, each represents the acme in their respective media of their generation in central Italy.

Sara Nair James is Professor of Art History Emerita at Mary Baldwin University. She is the author of *Signorelli and Fra Angelico at Orvieto: Liturgy, Poetry and a Vision of the End-time* (2003) and *Art in England from the Saxons to the Tudors* (2016).

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ART, DEVOTION, AND LITURGY IN ORVIETO

SARA NAIR JAMES
Mary Baldwin University

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For:
John Skillen
Brooks James
Lucy Ivey
Paul Barolsky
and the people of Orvieto

CONTENTS

PREFACE

The Orvieto Cathedral first captured my imagination in 1989 with my doctoral dissertation, the topic of which was the Apocalyptic and Last Judgment fresco program in the Cappella Nuova in the south transept (later rededicated to the Madonna San Brizio), begun by Dominican friar Fra Angelico in 1447 and completed by Luca Signorelli from 1499 to 1504, whom his contract calls "the finest artist in Italy."[1] The following June, I visited the city to see the frescoes in situ, experience the environment, and examine the archives. As I stepped off the "Duomo" minibus from the funicular that, in turn, had brought me from the train station to the top of the cliff, I stood transfixed by the size and majesty of the cathedral and the splendor of the glistening mosaics and sculpture on its west facade. The building appeared quite grand for such an off-the-beaten-path little town. I knew that I must find out why – and I did, which I share in this book. Following the midday "reposo" closing, I entered the cathedral and welcomed the cool of the zebra-striped stone walls. I adjusted my eyes to the dimmer, golden light from the alabaster window panels in the west wall and below the stained-glass saints that stood stiffly like sentinels in the window panels of the nave. Amidst the quiet hum of voices, I looked toward the darkened tribune in the east end. The medley of colored light from the enormous lancet window danced on the walls, which, along with the commanding frescoes of the Virgin Mary, drew me forward, as the artists intended for them to do.

Ironically, while the tribune was visible, the Cappella Nuova was filled with scaffolding and the iron gates chained shut with a sign, "IN RESTAURO." Thanks to then-archivist Lucio Riccetti, I was able to enter, climb the scaffold, and examine the frescoes at close range. Later, the tables turned; conservators swathed Ugolino's Life of the Virgin in scaffolding for a lengthy preservation project. Today, all scaffolding is gone and the frescoes are clean, but unlike the Cappella Nuova, where conservation brought deserved attention to the frescoes, the more prominently placed Marian window and fresco program have drawn little scholarly notice.

On subsequent visits to the cathedral, the Marian frescoes continued to intrigue me and make me wonder why no one had studied them. After I completed my book, *Signorelli and Fra Angelico at Orvieto: Liturgy, Poetry,*

and a Vision of the End-time (2003), I found that I could not give up Orvieto. I knew the city, its history, and its cathedral. I had discovered a liturgical basis for the fresco program in the Cappella Nuova, a pattern that Dominique Surh showed carried through in the Cappella del Corporale.[2] Thus, I turned my attention to the Marian frescoes and discovered liturgical and historical threads, rhetorical structure, and a wealth of previously unnoticed meaning.

In 2006, the diocese of Orvieto-Todi, the Archdiocese of Florence, and Gordon College sponsored a conference on the decoration of the Orvieto Cathedral. Nearly every living scholar who had written on the cathedral spoke. My paper addressed the frescoes of the Life of the Virgin. Later, a local woman asked me how I got from Signorelli back to Ugolino, since the programs were so different in style and character, so I relayed my journey to her. She immediately exclaimed, "Ah! You are in love!" Indeed, I am. That passion has driven me to delve into aspects of the frescoes at conferences and in two focused articles. During the lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic, I added the primarily Marian stained-glass window that bisects the frescoes. To give the two complementary artistic programs a context, this book includes artistic precedents, Orvietan history, and textual sources. The long journey to consolidate the underpinnings of these Marian programs has proven to be rich, worthwhile, and rewarding.

I also developed an appreciation of the Virgin Mary. She figured little in my Protestant upbringing, for in response to the Roman Catholic veneration of Mary, sixteenth-century Protestants purged her from their catechisms, hymns, and prayers. But the more I studied the art, the more I understood why she was (and is) so venerated. I once asked my Italian-American daughter-in-law what she missed most about moving from Roman Catholicism to Protestantism. Without hesitation she gave a one-word reply: "Mary." She is not alone. Mary has captivated Christians since the early days of the church; she remains relevant in popular culture.

In fact, between December 5, 2014, and April 12, 2015, the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, DC mounted an exhibition entitled *Picturing Mary: Woman, Mother, Idea*. Rather than a blockbuster amassing of masterworks, this relatively intimate show consisted of seventy-four Marian works, mainly western European from the fourteenth through the nineteenth centuries, most relatively small and obscure. The objects included one Michelangelo drawing, one Botticelli painting, one Caravaggio painting, a stained-glass window, several small pieces of sculpture, a few textiles, and some decorative enamels, but nothing by gentle Fra Angelico, innovative Leonardo, or synthesizing Raphael, each of whom achieved fame as a master of the Madonna. Even so, the exhibition drew the museum's largest crowds to date. It also merited a scholarly, yet accessible, catalog authored by foremost authorities, each of whom mentioned the mysterious allure of Mary. Likewise, in

December 2015, inspired by the success of the Marian exhibition, *National Geographic* published a cover story about Mary, focusing primarily on her modern reception. The magazine declared Mary the most often depicted woman ever and the most powerful female in the world – still.[3] This enduring legacy, the often-touted power of Marian images, and the thought-provoking lure of the Marian programs in Orvieto, along with my research, confirmed that these programs, their Italian antecedents, and the cult that inspired them deserved investigation, which is why I undertook this project.

NOTES

1 Luigi Fumi, *Il Duomo di Orvieto e i suoi restauri: Monografie storiche condotte sopra i documenti* (Rome: La Società LazialeTipograficheo-Editrice, 1891), 406, doc. CLV, April 4, 1499.
2 Dominique Surh, "Corpus Christi and the Cappella del Corporale at Orvieto" (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2000).
3 Susan Goldberg, "Hail Mary," *National Geographic* 228, no. 6 (December 2015): 7; Maureen Orth, "The Virgin Mary: The World's Most Powerful Woman," *National Geographic* 228, no. 6 (Dececember 2015): 30–59 at 30–31, 36.

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One Cambridge reader suggested that I add epigraphs, which not only enriched the chapters but inspired my writing. Several come from related scripture or hymns, some known to the fourteenth-century audience; other more modern ones include African-American spirituals and Virginia poets. Sarah Kennedy, a colleague in English literature who accompanied my students and me to Orvieto in 2005, was inspired to write poems about the frescoes, from which I excerpted several epigraphs. Likewise, Margaret MacKinnon and Ron Smith, both of Richmond, and Cara Modisett of Staunton, also generously shared poems with me. The previously unpublished full-length poems by Sarah Kennedy and Cara Modisett appear in the Appendix of this book.

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