Sacred Views of Saint Francis

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Sacred Views of St. Francis: The Sacro Monte di Orta examines a Renaissance-era pilgrimage site, a sacred mountain that is a compelling essay placed in full relief against the visually stunning backdrop of the Northern Italian Alps. The ceiling of Chapel XX of the Sacro Monte stands as the powerful final paragraph of that essay, one in which priests, architects, artists, and craftsmen strove to create a case for St. Francis’ powerful brand of imitatio Christi. On this ceiling Francis is ascending, while Christ, God, and the entire host of angels await him with crowns (see Fig. 1). There is music, too, a celestial symphony occasioned by the arrival of the man of Asissi in the realm beyond man. Created on a shaded hilltop on a small peninsula on the shore of Lake Orta, the Sacro Monte di Orta is made up of twenty chapels spread across the gentle hilltop topography dedicated to sharing the meaning and legacy of the life of St. Francis (see Fig. 2 and Chapter 1, Fig. 4). The ceiling of Chapel XX is not simply a conclusion to the essay, it is the powerful coda for the experience the pilgrims have as they traverse the chapels over the course of a day.

The ceiling of Chapel XX represents the end of an overwhelming Life of a Saint, a hagiography tracing Francis’ nativity through the chapters of his life to his death and ascension. The case made above the picturesque setting of Lago di Orta, which sits like a thin blue teardrop at the mouth of the Ossola Valley, is more than a simple Life, however. It is an argument made to an exterior world beyond the Italian peninsula, up the Ossola Valley, and over the Semplon Pass, and it is a love letter to the population of the peninsula itself. The ideological landscape was changing at a speed seldom, if ever, matched in history, and this Sacred Mountain entered the fray both as part of a larger push against Protestantism, as well as a sort of theatrical homily imploring the body of the remnant church to have faith in its efficacy and continued centrality. Indeed, as opposed to the case regarding the preeminence of Francis that had to be made to the archbishops depicted in the terra-cotta diorama of Chapel XX, the Sacro Monte read as a whole is in large part a populist expression of the primacy of Francis’ position in a post-Tridentine world. Francis is a local hero, an Italian, whose presence among them calls for their connection through him, through the Church, to God. His life, as presented on the verdant hilltop, is a reinterpretation of the gospel attributed to Christ: “I am the way.”

Descending from the vision of Archbishop Carlo Borromeo, the design and execution of the chapels expresses the Church’s desire to define, or perhaps better, redefine, itself for a transforming Christian diaspora. In the course of a few hours, pilgrims trace the text of Francis’ life until in the end any ambiguity about Francis’ centrality is finally erased as they see him rising to take possession of the crowns that await him. To see the ceiling
Fig. 1. St. Francis’ Ascension into Heaven, Ceiling Chapel XX, Sacro Monte di Orta.

Fig. 2. View of Lago Orta and Isola San Giulio from the Sacro Monte di Orta.
of Chapel XX at all, however, requires turning one’s eyes up, a task Chapel XX makes, and indeed to one degree or another each Chapel of the Sacro Monte di Orta makes, remarkably difficult, for the most immediate attractions in each chapel are the figures that populate them. They are a remarkable community of figures, representing all walks of life.

Francis had a vital role to play at this moment in the history of the Italian peninsula, and in no place is the case for his relevance made more beautifully, completely and comprehensively than the Sacro Monte di Orta. Riding a wave of enthusiasm created by the success of the Sacro Monte di Varallo, forty miles to the west, this Sacro Monte is both spectacle and hagiography, theme park and treatise. Its critical differences from the Sacro Monte di Varallo define and contextualize its importance.

There are a number of Sacri Monti in Northern Italy, the ones at Varallo and Orta being among the most fully realized and carefully preserved. Grouped together as World Heritage sites, it is all too easy to note their similarities and diminish their differences; however, when examining Varallo and Orta, the contrast is enlightening as it pertains to understanding the aesthetic and strategic vision of Orta. With over forty chapels, the Sacro Monte di Varallo leads the pilgrim on a far more rugged, exhausting and convoluted path than the Sacro Monte di Orta. It seems designed to challenge the pilgrim to exhaustion not only physically but spiritually. Perhaps the designers of Varallo were bent on shocking the pilgrim into submission to Christ and thus the Church. With chapels devoted to the Fall of Adam and Eve (Chapel I), Jesus’ capture (Chapel XXIII), Jesus’ trials (before Annas, Caiaphas, Pontius Pilate, and Herod, Chapels XXIV, XXV, XXVII, and XXIX respectively), and ten separate chapels devoted to stages of the Passion (see Fig. 3), perhaps most poignant example remains Chapel XI, “Slaughter of the Innocents” (see Fig. 4). It is grotesque, graphic, and leaves no doubt the designers were determined to demonstrate that the scene from Matthew’s Gospel rivals the darkest moments of the Old Testament for horrors. Amidst such scenes of suffering, a pilgrim might lose sight of the Good News of Christ. The Sacro Monte di Orta on the other hand, constructed across a far softer landscape than Varallo, strives to use the life path of Francis to inspire the pilgrims to lead lives of Francis-like devotion.

While at times graphic, there is little to turn a pilgrim away at the Sacro Monte di Orta, certainly nothing as grotesque and graphic as some of the imagery in the chapels at Varallo. Even in Chapel X, “The Temptation,” the pilgrim’s gaze is pulled visually away from the deeply shadowed devils on the left (see Chapter 5, Fig. 1) and toward the radiant angels on the right (see Chapter 5, Fig. 2),
Fig. 4. Slaughter of the Innocents, Chapel XI, Sacro Monte di Varallo.

Fig. 5. The Franciscan Coat of Arms, Sacro Monte di Varallo.
compelling us to read the text of Francis’ el-
eviation from left to right. While the position
of mankind is clearly precarious in Chapel X,
a sentiment close to the heart of Borromeo’s
messaging, in this chapel the pilgrims’ gaze
moves quickly passed that dark prospect and
beyond the chapel toward salvation—Francis’
and perhaps their own.
The purposefulness of the site is strate-
gically different as well. Telling the story
of Christ was about translating verbal text
to visual-theatrical text, yes, but it was not
about proving that Jesus was Christ, while
Sacro Monte di Orta is centered on making
a nuanced case that Francis was something
between a saint and a second Christ. Our
authors point out later in this volume that
Francis at Orta is presented as a *ne plus ultra*
saint—something more than a saint and less
than divine. So while Varallo is filled with
episodes of Christ’s life and particularly the
extended narrative of his suffering and his
death, Orta is an essay that elevates Francis
not simply to sainthood but something just
shy of the divinity occupied solely by the Fa-
ther, Son, and Holy Spirit (see Fig. 5). Thus
the Sacro Monte di Orta is a bold assertion
of Francis’ significance set bucolically above
Orta San Giulio. Fascinatingly, this construct
plays out in scenes where an observant pil-
grim finds ample connections between Fran-
cis and numerous individuals and stories of
the biblical tradition. Through its dioramas
and its frescoes, the Sacro Monte di Orta
conceives of Francis not only in the context
of *imitatio Christi*, but also in the full panoply
of biblical texts and its most sacred figures.

Often the Sacri Monti of the Piedmont
have been described as spiritual barriers
against frightening messages coming from
Northern Europe as the engines of the Ref-
ormation generated more and more heat;
however, the purposefulness of Orta is far
more dynamic than the thesis of a spiritual
barrier could fully explain. It is borne of a
passion to bring a message of the Church’s
own strengthening position. By affirming
the devotional role of art, the veneration of
saints, the value of pilgrimage, and the power
of the papacy, along with other doctrinal po-
sitions, the Sacro Monte di Orta is a stunning
artifact of the Catholic Reformation; and
its creation is not simply a defense against
Protestantism but, even more, it is an offen-
sive against it. It is righteous and purposeful
propaganda standing both as a message to the
outside world and importantly, as an epistle
to the internal world of the Italian milieu.
Demonstrating the intimacy of the message
is the fact that Francis as represented in these
chapels is deeply human—he is also a figure
made more approachable by the proximity of
the life he led to the lives of the pilgrims who
made the trek to the Sacro Monte. The Holy
Land must have seemed many worlds away.
Its loss as a pilgrimage site also distanced
Christ from the faithful. Francis, if made into
viable conduit, allowed the faithful closer ac-
cept to the divine than Christ could now pro-
vide. He was a local and somewhat contem-
porary hero compared to the more distant
legendary status of Christ; thus the syllogism
becomes: “He is one of us; he led a life that led
to heaven; therefore, we will go to heaven as
well if we follow his way”—a way that aligns
with Catholicism.
The figures from the actual story of Fran-
cis—the nameable participants: Peter Berna-
done, St. Clare, Lady Jacoba, Pope Innocent
III, Pope Nicholas V, Pope Gregory IX, even
Francis himself—are often the least interest-
ing figures in any particular tableau. It is the
extras that lend the chapels their lasting im-
mediacy: an old woman, a multiple ampu-
te, a dwarf, children, animals. In this way
the most visually compelling chapels—XIII,
XIV, XVI, XX—are more than simply thea-
tre, they are operatic in their structure where
each voice becomes present as a pilgrim
scans through the momentum of each action-
packed scene. These chapels tell a story that
can only be told as a communal expression.
The implicit message is that Francis and his
story belong both to the terracotta figures in
each chapel, as well as to the pilgrims viewing
the scene. The poignancy of this idea intensi-
fies when one recognizes that the kiln that heated and hardened the clay of the figures was located beside Chapel XIX, and evidence indicates that the models for many of the figures were likely people that lived in the area, perhaps as close as the ten-minute walk down to Orta San Giulio further narrowing the space between pilgrim, the figures in the chapels, and Francis. Thus, by the transitive property the Sacro Monte brings the catholic communion in short order from the world they inhabit, through Francis—a saint whose faith and action define his hagiography—to the divine. Notably, in Chapel XX representation of the Conclave that debated Francis’ potential sainthood includes the explicit message that the path also goes through Rome. Francis’ ascension as represented here reasserts the critical relevance of the Roman Catholic Church.

Here we come to the most crucial point: in the Sacro Monte we can see in physical representation the fine line, maybe an impossible line, the Church was attempting to walk after the Council of Trent—that is, the Church was seeking the narrow space between enfranchising a nascent kind of populism in the Piedmont, while re-cementing the hierarchical primacy of the Church. In virtually the same breath, the Church is giving Francis’ story to the people and claiming it for Rome.

In Italy’s post-Tridentine moment, we can see through to this tension in the presentation of contemporary figures who are dressed in period clothing. The figures in each chapel are remarkable for their clothes and the representations of fabric. The realistic presentation, intended to bring Francis to the pilgrim as much as to bring the pilgrim across time and space to Francis, embodies an idea not easily accepted in the Rome of the same period. The rigidity of the Catholic Church in Rome expressed itself through its religious art. Caravaggio, who spent much of his prime in Rome, grew up close enough to the Sacro Monte di Varallo to have borne the influence of the site throughout his career. If one looks at the cold reception of Caravaggio’s style in Rome at this very moment in time, one can see evidence of the divisions in the peninsula. Caravaggio, whose chiaroscuro was influenced by the presentation of figures at Sacro Monte di Varallo, echoed the sort of theatrical presentation found at the Sacri Monti far more than the less dynamic presentations of the very artists who were quickest to dismiss his approach in Rome. They were in fact offended by his style due to the fact that it was realistic to an apparently blasphemous degree. In order to strengthen the tie of Rome to the piedmont, the Church needed something more than a one size fits all approach to proselytizing the primacy of the Catholic Church. They need a strategy that would work beyond Rome that Rome itself was not prepared for. What remained largely above reproach in Rome no longer could be a winning strategy beyond Rome. The Sacro Monte di Orta serves as an artifact of that recognition.

Caravaggio’s volatile period in Rome is a harbinger the imminent arrival of change not only across Europe but in the seat of Catholicism itself. The eternal tensions between Rome and piedmont, between city and country, between educated and ignorant, between wealth and poverty, between high and low culture, and between desire to preserve a status quo and join a revolution sift to the surface through Caravaggio and the Sacro Monte di Orta, and sooner or later it was bound to leave a mark not simply beyond Rome on a hilltop beside a piedmont lake but within Rome as well.

Through the Sacro Monte di Orta, the peninsula of Orta San Giulio becomes a microcosm of the Italian peninsula itself, thus allowing the population of pilgrims who visited this Sacro Monte to see ‘the way” as beginning from where they were rather than from an increasingly distant and abstract sense of Rome, much less the Holy Land. As a result, the Sacro Monte di Orta becomes the Rome of the Orta Peninsula, a place where pilgrims could see their own faces close to the
face of one as blessed as Francis. It was there-fore vital to make Francis into more than a saint, one whose name might be lost in a quickly expanding catalogue of saints. In his role as a ne plus ultra saint, Francis provides a special link between humanity and the di-vine, a particular necessity in the face of the German Protestant threat.

After spending so much time photographing the chapels for Sacred Views of Saint Francis: The Sacro Monte di Orta, I began to wonder what we can know about these people who served as models for the terracotta figures. I also imagined their descendants visiting the chapels to see those clay faces echoed in their own. What were they trying to tell us through this fascinating place that they created on a bucolic hilltop? I now believe they have some relevant advice for us:

• **Live lives of civic engagement.** They were participants in, not simply observers of, their community. They helped create their world, as opposed to simply commenting on it.

• **Value the future, and believe in legacy.** The chapels were always intended for per-manency. The commitment necessary to design them, build them, complete them was extraordinary. Our world often seems to value planned obsolescence over and above permanency.

• **See our lives among others as acts of devo-tion and as expressions of faith.** The chap-els are filled with stunningly beautiful and ornate artwork: paintings, terracottas, ironwork, woodwork, stone carving. It seems clear that talented artisans spent years of their lives working in just this one site. Working on the Sacro Monte, which is completely focused on St. Francis, was in and of itself an expression of both faith and devotion. Their life of faith was inseparable from their professional lives.

• **Welcome the entire world community to share in important stories.** The figures in the chapels are not visions of ideal form nor do they represent one ethnicity or background. Many types of people are represented—African people, European people, Middle Eastern people, rich and poor, young, old and in between people, Christians, a Jew, Muslims, a Native American, as well as various individuals with physical impairments—a man with a goiter examines Francis’ stigmata in one chapel, while a multiple amputee stares off wistfully in another. The scenes in the chapels seem to invite the world—not just the world at the beginning of the seventeenth century, but our world as well—to the story of St. Francis.

The authors of this volume believe we have much to learn from them.

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