**Abstract: St. Clare of Assisi: Charity and Social Justice in Early Modern Italy**

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This paper explores the rebirth of St. Clare of Assisi as a central protagonist of Renaissance art. It explains in detail the appearance of St. Clare in new roles as a legislator and abbess; as a Misericordia saint (Madonna of Mercy); as protector and civic saint against plagues and finally as a miracle worker. The visual images are discussed in conjunction with the homiletic tradition and in relation to the Observant movement. In the fifteenth century, the images of St. Clare of Assisi are in dialogue and competition with the iconographic traditions of other female saints as Catherine of Siena and Birgitta of Sweden. Artists and their patrons revived the cult of St. Clare partly as a response to the flourishing cults of the female saints of the fourteenth century. Theologians, hagiographers, friars and sisters were working together to promote her cult. Franciscan Observant preachers as Bernardino da Siena and Giovanni da Capestrano, and Clarissan nuns as Battista Alfani dedicated much of their institutional and homiletic efforts for promoting the cult of St. Clare. In short, the paper reviews the diffusion of her cult among a variety of locations and focuses upon images that have received little scholarly attention; they highlight the richness and diversity reborn into the figure of St. Clare and her becoming a social leader and activist in the Observant reform of the fifteenth century.

In the second half of the fifteenth century there was a gradual growth in the importance of St. Clare in the visual tradition. This change was apparent in formal artistic terms: she was transformed from a marginal figure depicted in secluded niches or in small roundels into a major character as central figure in *Sacra Conversatione* panels, in narrative *predella* panels, and finally in the painted dossal showing her at the center with surrounding narrative scenes illustrating her biography. Her cult was revived in anecdotal pictorial genres, in her relative location in works of art, in the number of images and in their spread throughout Italy, but most of all in its content. St. Clare was transformed from a humble virgin into an abbess and legislator, a benefactor and a Misericordia saint, a guardian saint against plagues, and a powerful miracle worker who could control animals as well as storms and who chased away the Saracen army.

Preaching and reform activities by the Observant Franciscans and Clarissan nuns were largely responsible to the renewed interest in St. Clare in the visual tradition. We sometime see an exact equivalence between the textual and visual traditions: the reformers stressed St. Clare’s roles as an abbess and a legislator, so that she appears in art with a pastoral staff and the book of her rule. Some sources written by Clarissan sisters highlighted the closeness between St. Clare and St. Francis and this association is clearly apparent in some of the images from a Clarissan context. Important discrepancies are also in evidence.
when we compare the textual and visual traditions: whereas the texts elaborate on the way St. Clare fasted, depriving herself of food and the physical agonies she inflicted upon herself, the images portray a different picture. She is often young and beautiful and there is hardly any trace of either fasting or physical harm. The artistic portrait is in line with the contemporaneous Italian ideals of beauty: white skin, radiant eyes, a red mouth, and a high forehead. On the whole, St. Clare is pretty.

When we turn to a consideration of St. Clare’s miracles there is a significant difference between the textual and visual traditions. The literature focuses on conventional miracles, such as curing the blind and the sick, helping ill children, and healing the lame. The scenes chosen in art are the unconventional, exceptional, ones, St. Clare is commanding animals, stopping a storm, and marking loaves of bread with crosses. The iconographic tradition of St. Clare highlights an exchange between the visual tradition of other female saints, such as St. Birgitta of Sweden and St. Catherine of Siena, whose cults developed in mid-fifteenth-century art, was and was influenced by the visual tradition of male Franciscan saints such as St. Francis, St. Bernardino of Siena, and especially St. John of Capistrano. Particularly intriguing is the revival of the scene showing St. Clare Expelling the Saracens from Assisi, evocative of the episode showing St. John of Capistrano Defeating the Ottomans at Belgrade. This story would become the essence of the cult of St. Clare in the succeeding centuries.

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