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Simone Martini's *Altar of Saint Louis of Toulouse*

The House of Anjou was a Frankish noble family that was held a great deal of power during the thirteenth and fourteenth century in Europe. The ruled various territories, including Jerusalem, Sicily and Hungary. Italian painter, Simone Martini's *The Altar of Saint Louis of Toulouse* depicts Saint Louis of Anjou crowning his brother, King Robert II. ¹ The painting was done with tempera on panel and is currently housed at the Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte in Naples. The purpose of the altarpiece generates a strong religious affiliation, as well as honors the family's power during a time of turmoil. This piece was likely a method to secure the Angevin dynasty's dominant reputation to the public, as well as pay tribute to Saint Louis and his family.

The altarpiece was used to celebrate various events connected to the Angevin royal house. The piece contains iconography that is entirely individualized to the saint and to the Angevin dynasty; this dynasty was a Frankish noble family, which is also known as the House of Anjou. ² This altarpiece represents the crown in which Robert takes over and keeps the Martel family enthroned. After Charles Martel passed away in 1295, his father Charles II took steps to divert the Neapolitan succession by a child. Louis, the second son, was adamant about wanting to become

¹ Martindale, Andrew. *Simone Martini: Complete Edition*. (New York: New York University Press, 1988) p. 18

² A. Martindale (1988) p. 18

Franciscan and firmly declining the throne and it is for this reason that the succession to Naples was left to the third son, Robert.

The altarpiece has a main panel and a horizontal predella, which has five different parts. In the main panel, Saint Louis of Anjou is shown, dressed as Bishop of Toulouse, crowning his younger brother, King Robert II. In the predella, there are five scenes of events that are indicative of the “life, death and canonization” of Saint Louis.³

The identification of the figures in the piece is certain due to the compilation of Saint Louis’s canonization. Martini uses symbols that assist the process of who is featured in each image, displaying various coat of arms that are associated with different families and their affiliations with the church. For example, the main panel is decorated front and back with French royal arms differenced for Anjou, showing the royal status of the Saint. The known iconography of arms may be used to identify figures and events in which these figures were involved.

The attention Simone Martini paid to incorporating familiar iconography that is related with the House of Anjou, as well as indicate the subject matter include “the crozier carried by St. Louis, the carpet on the floor, and the fine intarsia base of the throne”.⁴ The depicted crozier is a hooked staff carried by a bishop as a symbol of pastoral office; in this case, the crozier points to Saint Louis being a bishop to crown Robert, although he is not yet an authentic bishop at this point in the narrative. Those are more obscure details within the altarpiece; however, there are more recognizable icons for the viewer to recognize. The major contributor to identifying

³ A. Martindale (1988) p. 18

⁴ A. Martindale (1988) p. 18

the subject matter is the heraldry, which gives more broad information about the Angevin territorial connections in Hungary and Jerusalem. The Hungarian arms are present in the spandrels of the predella, providing a more concentrated interest. This icon is rooted from the “claim to Hungary passed to the Angevins by the virtue of the marriages of Charles II to the heiress Mary of Hungary”. Mary of Hungary had part in the financing of the altarpiece.⁵

Martini includes elements that establish the main panel’s scene as flawed or fabricated with the aid of artistic license. Martini shows Saint Louis crowning Robert II, however, Louis could in no sense be said to have crowned Robert, since he had firmly decided to become a Franciscan instead of succeeding the crown. Instead, Martini portrays Louis, curiously dressed as a bishop, resigning his rights to the throne and handing the crown over to his younger brother, Robert.⁶ This narrative in the imagery is explained further with a turbulent path for Louis to reach the Franciscan order. The altarpiece portrays the significant religious affiliation for the family of Louis and the House of Anjou.

The story behind the altarpiece and the situation depicted is that Charles II of Anjou, father of Louis, had a terrible military campaign and political turmoil against King Alphonse III of Aragon and the Sicilian Vespers capture Charles II’s sons. Louis, Robert and another son were sent to Catalonia for seven years in order to attain their father’s freedom. During this time of holding, Louis decided his path was to become a Franciscan – largely influenced by Francesco Brun and Pietro Scarrier, his chaplain and tutor. In contrast, Robert did not share the same devotion for religion

⁵ A. Martindale (1988) p. 193

⁶ A. Martindale (1988) p. 193

as his brother. Once released, which was also after their father passed a few months earlier in 1295, Louis briefly took over throne of three different territories. Pope Boniface VIII then granted Louis to sub-deaconry and this allowed Louis to renounce his position to the throne and Robert succeeded him. Due to later complications Boniface made valiant effortsto resolve issues and nominated Louis to Bishop of Toulouse and entered the Franciscan order.⁷

It is the horizontal predella located under the main panel that is more informative in terms of giving background narrative. The aforementioned five scenes provide the viewer with the story of Louis' life, death and canonization. In the first scene, the Caetani arms, shown on the hanging behind the dais, support the identity of the pope as Pope Boniface VIII. In the second scene, St Louis is received into the Franciscan order and consecrated Bishop of Toulouse. In the third scene, there is not clear textual evidence, but depicted is St Louis serving guests at a banquet. This scene challenges the narrative of his life because the guests of Saint Louis are meant to be poor, but they are reasonably well dressed and clean. In the fourth scene, shown is the significant funeral with senior clergy, a choir, and mourners grieving Saint Louis. The cope, a long loose cloak worn by a priest or bishop on ceremonial occasions, displayed in the scene is brilliant, eliminated the question of status of the subject. The final scene of the predella depicts the *Miracle of St Louis*, which shows the curing of child.⁸

⁷ Hoch, Adrian S. *The Franciscan Provenance of Simone Martini's Angevin St. Louis in Naples*. (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag GmbH Munchen Berlin, 1995) p.

⁸ A. Martindale (1988) p. 194

The original location of the altarpiece was in the seventh chapel off the south nave of San Lorenzo Maggiore. It then entered the Bacio-Terracina chapel around 1700 due to a possible reconstruction of the initial location. This move would also explain the missing side shafts on the piece.⁹

The function of the altarpiece is made clearer with the assistance of the iconography. The iconography allows for the viewer to entirely and accurately comprehend the narrative, as well as understand the background of the subject matter. Simone Martini's piece is often paralleled with Duccio's *Maesta* from Siena, but the differences in approach and content is what sets Martini's in a unique category of unprecedented innovation. For example, "Duccio almost always projected his figures in front of the architectural context," whereas Martini's figures are contained within the architectural space.¹⁰ In the main panel, the brother's are depicted in rich garments that imply royalty, as well as heraldic icons.¹¹ Other elements to be explored are the touches of the Gothic style, still present in the piece or lost over time.

The purpose of the piece was partly an effort to dismiss Louis's spiritual path and resigning his claim to the throne. His renouncement was a matter that was frowned upon by his family, the House of Anjou, as well as those of Naples and the Angevin dynasty. The other element of this altarpiece was to solidify Robert's claim to throne, as he usurped the throne of Hungary from his nephew Charles Robert in 1296. Robert likely did this for a couple of reasons; he wanted the power of the

⁹ A. Hoch (1995) p. 22-24

¹⁰ A. Martindale (1988) p. 18

¹¹ A. Hoch (1995) p. 25

throne and took full advantage of taking that over, as well as he and Louis did not want a young boy to succeed Louis. The altarpiece reflects upon the life of Louis and how he prayed endlessly for the end of the Plague. This piece may be the object that saved the reputation of the family and assisted the cover up of how the throne was handed off from Louis to Robert.¹² With iconography of the royal family and strong religious connections with Louis of Toulouse, Simone Martini's extremely public altarpiece had significant prominence in society and grand promotion of the House of Anjou.

¹² A. Hoch (1995) p. 25-26

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