

The University of Vermont

*The Laudario of Sant'Agnese*

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In fourteenth century Italy, illuminated manuscripts were the preferred medium of artists and patrons to express their wealth and faith. Confraternities, a society of laypeople, often commissioned these highly decorated prayer books to highlight their piety and prosperity. The Compagnia di Sant'Agnese of Florence is responsible for producing the century's most elaborate and lavish manuscript, the *Laudario of Sant'Agnese* in 1340.<sup>1</sup> Every leaf is exquisitely decorated and speaks volumes of Italian ideals in the Trecento. Illuminated manuscripts in this period, such as the *Laudario of Sant'Agnese*, were extremely important in allowing the Florentine middle class to express their growing wealth, their elevated social status and their faith in the Catholic Church. As the plague ravished Florence it threatened to decimate the political, economic and social system upon which the middle class was so reliant. Through it all, Illuminated manuscripts, such as the *Laudario of Sant'Agnese* provided people with comfort, whether it was in the quality of the workmanship that showcased their wealth or the prayers that solidified their faith in God.

Towards the end of the 1200s the economy in Florence was booming, and with it so was the middle class. For the first time society's power, wealth and prestige was taken from the aristocracy and given to the laypeople. They redefined Italian culture, from the way labor was organized to the way religious services were practiced. Guilds were created to ensure steady and fair employment as each one revolved around a specific craft and by their conjoined efforts they helped turn Florence into one of the main centers of power in Italy. However "as shopkeepers,

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Kren and Kurt Barstow, *Italian Illuminated Manuscripts in the J. Paul Getty Museum* (Los Angeles: J Paul Getty, 2005), 221

traders, and artisans became increasingly involved in civic life, they began to assemble into lay confraternities, or *compagnie*, which performed charitable works and gathered to pray and sing hymns of praise, or *laude*.”<sup>2</sup>

The Compagnia di Sant’Agnese is one of the oldest confraternities in the church of Santa Maria del Carmine, dedicating itself to Saint Agnes as early as 1291.<sup>3</sup> While it was smaller than many others, what it lacked in size, it made up for in elaboration. Every year members were known to put on an extravagant theatrical production of Christ’s ascension, a festivity enjoyed by the entire church. It is no wonder that they are also responsible for producing the most notable example of fourteenth century illumination, one that was lush in gold leaf details and paintings by renowned artists<sup>4</sup>. In the second half of the century, the confraternity became a necessity in providing “elaborate funeral services and memorial masses for their members, the demand for which increased considerably during the time of the Black Death.”<sup>5</sup> More than ever the *Laudario of Sant’Agnese* acted as a bridge connecting the laities to their faith. While the Compagnia di Sant’Agnese had formed as a way of men flaunting their wealth through the power of God, as disease destroyed their city, people cared less about the elaboration of their devotional imagery and more about its use.

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<sup>2</sup> Christina Sciacchi, *Florence at the Dawn of the Renaissance Painting and Illumination, 1300-1350*, (Los Angeles: J Paul Getty Museum, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Laurence B Kanter, *Painting and Illumination in Early Renaissance*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994) 51

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Kren and Kurt Barstow, *Italian Illuminated Manuscripts in the J. Paul Getty Museum* (Los Angeles: J Paul Getty, 2005), 223

<sup>5</sup> Christina Sciacchi, *Florence at the Dawn of the Renaissance Painting and Illumination, 1300-1350*, (Los Angeles: J Paul Getty Museum, 2012).

Catholic mass during the fourteenth century largely consisted of the papacy reciting sermons in Latin to people who were almost entirely illiterate. Despite religion being woven into almost virtually every aspect of life, common middle-class citizens had no way of understanding what their religious leaders were preaching. However, as the popularity of confraternities grew, so did the demand for hymns and prayers to be recited in the Italian vernacular. The *Laudario of Sant'Agnese* is an excellent example of religion responding to the needs of the masses. Songs were arranged in a call-and-response format that was more similar to secular music than the structured chants used in church.<sup>6</sup> Using a simpler, friendlier, song style encouraged involvement in the Church. When disease broke out in 1348 people assumed that God was punishing His children for not being devout enough<sup>7</sup>, and in response to this assumption, people found a renewed sense of faith. They turned to the hymns as a way of expressing their piety, embracing the vernacular language even more so as they begged God for his mercy.

Today the manuscript pages are separated and therefore it is hard to contextualize how astonishing the completed manuscript must have been, but certainly the work would have struck awe into all those who viewed it. While illuminated manuscripts were relatively popular they were expensive to produce and often times patrons chose black and white imagery and minimal decoration to cut costs.<sup>8</sup> By the collective efforts, and money, of the Campagna di Sant'Agnese

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Kren and Kurt Barstow, *Italian Illuminated Manuscripts in the J. Paul Getty Museum* (Los Angeles: J Paul Getty, 2005), 222

<sup>7</sup> Louise Marshall, "Manipulating the Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy" *Renaissance Quarterly* (1994): 518

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Kren and Kurt Barstow, *Italian Illuminated Manuscripts in the J. Paul Getty Museum* (Los Angeles: J Paul Getty, 2005),

“[the] elaborate page design and the rich and varied imagery that appears throughout the surviving leaves of the manuscript are more ambitious than those found in most other contemporary Florentine *laudari* or choir books used in the Mass or Divine Office.”<sup>9</sup>

The Campagnia di Sant’Agnese was well aware of whom it was they commissioned to create the masterpiece and it is thanks to Pacino Bonaguida and the Master of the Dominican Effigies that the manuscript exists. Of the surviving twenty-eight leaves it is assumed twenty-three were completed by Pacino di Bonaguida, and the remaining five by the Master of the Dominican Effigies. Whether the two artists worked simultaneously or if the Master of Dominican Effigies was hired to complete work later is still unknown, but that does not take away from the exquisite folios that were produced.

Set against a dense blue background Saint Lawrence is stretched out naked over a grill of glowing embers surrounded by Romans and angels. Rather than being pictured in pain and agony, Pacino di Bonaguida chose to depict the saint in prayerful ecstasy. As the artist was known for following Giotto’s style; his figures are often displayed in profile with distinct hand gestures and a sense of weight that distinguishes them from his solid-color backgrounds<sup>10</sup>. His representation of the *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* exemplifies the artist’s unique style for manuscript illumination. By strengthening one’s faith in God, they too could surpass the

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Kren and Kurt Barstow, *Italian Illuminated Manuscripts in the J. Paul Getty Museum* (Los Angeles: J Paul Getty, 2005), 224

<sup>10</sup> Web Gallery of Art “Biography of Pacino di Bonaguida”  
[http://www.wga.hu/bio\\_m/p/pacino/biograph.html](http://www.wga.hu/bio_m/p/pacino/biograph.html)

suffering of the plague and ascend to a peaceful eternity with God. The results changed the way martyrdom was viewed.<sup>11</sup>

Though the *Laudario of Sant'Agnese* was completed before the plague broke out, it would have certainly been a source of inspiration for the confraternity members in the second half of the century. Those who were unlucky enough to be sickened by the plague experienced insufferable pain, and turned to their saints as a source of solace. One example is the martyrdom of Saint Lawrence. When he gave away riches to the Prefect of Rome was so angered by his actions that he sentenced Lawrence to death, burning him on an iron grill.<sup>12</sup> His act of selflessness and great suffering allowed him to spend an eternity in heaven with God.<sup>13</sup> The image in the manuscript reminded viewers that material possessions could not save them from the plague, but embracing God might.

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<sup>11</sup> Laurence B Kanter, *Painting and Illumination in Early Renaissance*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994) 58

<sup>12</sup> Catholic Online "St. Lawrence – Martyr" [https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint\\_id=366](https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=366)

<sup>13</sup> Louise Marshall, "Manipulating the Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy" *Renaissance Quarterly* (1994): 493



***The Martyrdom of Saint  
Lawrence***

Ca. 1340

Tempera and gold leaf on  
parchment

7 ½ x 8 3/16 in.

14

The Master of the Dominican Effigies, was a miniaturist artist that also followed in the path of Giotto, as Bonaguida did. However, unlike Bonaguida, the Master of the Dominican Effigies created mountainous backgrounds and implemented more gold throughout the entire image, rather than just around the margins<sup>15</sup>. In *The Nativity and the Annunciation to the Shepherds* he demonstrates his personal style while still reminding the viewer the importance of their faith. Mary is pictured lying across a rocky landscape flanked by various figures that are paying respect to the Virgin. Distinct from the solid gold or blue backgrounds of other folios, the Master of the Dominican Effigies used a dark blue sky dotted with gold stars.<sup>16</sup> Once again this folio attests to the wealth the Campangia di Sant'Agnese

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<sup>14</sup> Christina Sciaci , *Florence at the Dawn of the Renaissance Painting and Illumination, 1300-1350* , (Los Angeles: J Paul Getty Museum, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Web Gallery of Art "Biography of the Master of the Dominican Effigies"  
[http://www.wga.hu/bio\\_m/m/master/dominica/biograph.html](http://www.wga.hu/bio_m/m/master/dominica/biograph.html)

<sup>16</sup> Christina Sciaci , *Florence at the Dawn of the Renaissance Painting and Illumination, 1300-1350* , (Los Angeles: J Paul Getty Museum, 2012).

had but also provided comfort to the members during the time of the plague. The Virgin Mary was an extremely important devotional figure for she had conceived Christ and because of him the sins of mankind had been forgiven. His selfless act reminds viewers that only true redemption could save them from Hell should they have fallen sick to the plague.



***The Nativity and the Annunciation to the Shepherds***

Ca. 1340

Tempera on gold leaf parchment

14 5/8 x 10 11/16 in.

17

1348 marked a very important turning point for Florence, Italy. Disease ravaged the city and stunted any progress that had been made in the previous fifty or so years. Suddenly, rather than having guilds competing to construct better

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<sup>17</sup> Christina Sciaci , *Florence at the Dawn of the Renaissance Painting and Illumination, 1300-1350* , (Los Angeles: J Paul Getty Museum, 2012).



buildings or for confraternities vying to have a more ornate chapel, people were collectively trying to avoid the Black Death. The confraternities became critical in ensuring their members received all of the proper funerary services to ensure a place in heaven.<sup>18</sup> But for those still living, their illuminated manuscripts were important in uniting the members as they struggled to survive the plague.

The *Laudario of Sant'Agnese* embodies the transition from a time of affluence to a time of devastating sickness. As each piece is both aesthetically pleasing and religiously important it is easy to see why the members of the Compagnia di Sant'Agnese would have been so proud of their illuminated manuscript. To be in a position that allowed for the commission of the work would have been extremely prestigious but less than a decade later it would have served as a massively important aspect in dealing with the anguish the plague caused. Almost seven hundred years later the images on those twenty-eight leaves still awe the viewer with their beauty but also call for a sense of piety and respect from the beholder.

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Kren and Kurt Barstow, *Italian Illuminated Manuscripts in the J. Paul Getty Museum* (Los Angeles: J Paul Getty, 2005), 221

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