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ARTH 155
April 8, 2014

Religious Brotherhood and Anonymity

The Frontispiece of the *Mariegola of the Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista* is an elaborate cover from a manuscript dated from 1300-1330. A depiction of the Last Judgment is set against an ornate gold background with every figure dressed in vibrant garments that seem to glow. Christ is seated in the center, the largest of all the many figures, sporting the sign of benediction. He stares out from the page, his head ringed with a simple red halo. To the viewers' left is the Virgin Mary, clad in her traditional blue robe with the basic halo. She stares adoringly up at her son. To the right, Saint John the Evangelist, wearing a pearly white robe, also with the simple halo. They both signal and look up towards Christ, emphasizing where the viewers' attention should be. Many angels, all of who stare devotedly up at Christ, flank the three main figures. In the bottom third of the page is a crowd of hooded figures: the Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista, the commissioners of the page. They all bear the same red cross and insignia of their order on their robes and their hoods cover their heads. From their clasped hands hangs the traditional whip used for self-flagellation rituals that occurred within many of the medieval confraternities in Italy. They stand in a tightknit group, some are fully blocked by those in front. It was common in the 14th century for confraternities to commission works such as this and group members would often be included in the images. As I will discuss here, the imagery from the Frontispiece of the *Mariegola of the Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista* symbolizes the confraternity's ideals of brotherhood and

emphasizes the importance of both the collective group as well as the importance of keeping their individual anonymity.

Confraternities (*scuoles*) throughout Venice served many purposes, however their original function was to provide a space for private worship and support for their members. As they grew in size, gaining more recognition and financial stability, their duties expanded as well. They participated in artistic and social activities within society, however religious observance was always at the heart of the confraternity's activities.[1] Each confraternity had a church where their members would attend each week. These groups provided charity both within the group and externally, aiding hospitals and helping to feed the poor. Different *scuoles* had different holidays and feast days, which would be outlined in their individual rulebook (the *mariegola*).[2] Confraternities were perceived as welcoming to all members of the community, however they did have some restrictions as to who could join. The classifications for membership would also be written in the *mariegola*. These factors included things like religious standing (heretics and anyone considered an enemy of the church were excluded), age, sex (most flagellant confraternities did not permit women to join), profession, and if the individual had a physical disability.[3] For the most part the confraternities were very welcoming, and most memberships lasted for life.

The group portrayed in this frontispiece is a typical depiction of a

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[1] Jonathan Glixon, *Late Medieval Chant for a Venetial Confraternity: Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, MS Lat. II.* Musica Disciplina, Vol. 49 (1995) pg. 190.
[2] Glixon, 192.
[3] Marina Gazzini,*"Solidarity and Brotherhood in Medieval Italian Confraternities: A Way of Inclusion or Exclusion?"* Reti Medieval Journal [online] Vol. 13 No. 2 (2012) pg. 4

confraternity. This imagery of the group dressed in their ritual robes is meant to enforce the confraternity's ideal of brotherhood and their collective unity. "Whereas the representation of private donors reflects personal initiatives, the images of confraternity members typically reinforce group identity and the ideal of equality for both internal and external audiences"[4]. Groups of confraternity members are often depicted hooded and with little individuality, this allows for their values of equality within the confraternity to be shown to outsiders.[5] With their hoods on, all class distinctions are eliminated and everyone becomes an equal devotee to god.

The practice of self-flagellation was practiced widely within most confraternities in the 14th century and was an important aspect of the orders. "The first three *scuole grandi*, Santa Marie della Carita, San Marco, and San Giovanni Evangelista, were founded as flagellant confraternities in 1260 and 1261 as part of a penitential fever that swept through Europe in those years"[6]. Flagellation was a private ritual, kept solely within the group. Unlike the many feasts and ceremonies that the orders made public, the flagellation ritual occurred in dark rooms with participants' faces covered. "In these companies, self-flagellation (*divotione*) took place after prayers had been recited…The lights were then blown out, and the brothers, who had now pulled their hoods over their heads, flagellated themselves

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[4] Ellen Schiferl, *Corporate Identity and Equality: Confraternity Members in Italian Painting, C. 1340-1510*. Notes in the History of Art, Vol. 8, No 2 (Winter 1989). Pg. 12

[5] Schiferl, 13.
[6] Glixon, 190.

through the opening in their gowns that left their bare backs exposed to the whips"[7]. The ritual is meant to show the member's intense devotion as well as act as penance for any sins that might have been committed. The anonymity during these ceremonies is also significant. By hiding their faces, the group could come together as one; they must give up their own identities in order to gain a group identity.[8] This achieves religious favor for the entire confraternity as well as the individual participant.

Even if only a small number of individuals are represented in the confraternity's commissioned pieces, they stand for the entire *scoule*, both in space and time. "The portrayal of a group of figures referred not only to the membership of the confraternity during the time of the commission, but also to past and future congregations…just as hoods eliminated individuality, they also eliminated references to a specific moment in time"[9]. Confraternities wanted to be seen as timeless institutions with a timeless connection to god that endured well after the death of individual members[10]. In the art that they commission for the purpose of their confraternity, they themselves become symbols of this timeless connection through their lack of individuality in the depictions.

Death and dying rituals were important elements of being part of the community. Just as charity was an important part of the confraternity during life, so

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[7]Ludovica Sebregondi, *Religious Furnishings and Devotional Objects in Renaissance Florentine Confraternities*, in *Crossing Boundaries Christian Piety and the Arts in Italian Medieval and Renaissance Confraternities,* edited by Konrad Eisenbichler (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991) pg. 149
[8] Schiferl, 17.
[9] Schiferl, 13.
[10] Schiferl, 13.

they did the same in death. There were many rules and rites, stipulated in each group's rule book, that had to be followed if a member became sick or died which became more elaborate as the confraternity gained status and significant finances[11]. Other members were expected to visit their sick brother routinely, and once they had died, it fell on the group as a whole to fund the funeral and burial. Similarly to other elements of confraternity life, death was turned into a collective act and "'dying well' [became a phenomenon], spreading generally in Europe from the later fourteenth century…stimulated by a growing preoccupation with mortality…"[12] Though there are likely many converging factors that led to this cultural change, the plague of 1348, as well as smaller plagues later in the century, no doubt contributed to these changes in attitude.

Equality and anonymity were important values of the confraternity that are depicted in this frontispiece. Members of these religious folds wanted to create a group identity, giving up their own in order to strengthen the group and create stronger bonds between individuals and god. Through their depictions of hooded figures and their rituals requiring them to hide their faces, they were able to achieve the unification that they desired. When hiding under these hoods, members became anonymous, freeing themselves in order to fully repent to god. Members became equals in these depictions, they were wiped of any class distinctions and it was impossible to tell who has a higher standing within the confraternity and external society. This frontispiece created for the Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista

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[11] Nicholas Terpstra, *Death and Dying*, in *Crossing Boundaries Christian Piety and the Arts in Italian Medieval and Renaissance Confraternities,* edited by Konrad Eisenbichler (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991) pg. 183.
[12] Terpstra, 183.

exemplifies these values that the confraternity strove for in their religious and secular duties.

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