

Invisible Presence The Nuns' Choir at Santa Maria di Monteluca in Perugia

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*'La sudetta copia fu di publica universale soddisfazione' 'Magra consolazione'*¹

With this entry in the chronicle of the Monastery of Santa Maria di Monteluca, abbess Maria Taccini welcomed, with some bitterness, the new altarpiece of the *Coronation of the Virgin*. The original altarpiece had been confiscated by the French during the Napoleonic invasion of the late eighteenth century, and the painting returned to the community of Perugian nuns in 1830 was a copy: a small consolation for the Raphael that, after Napoleon's defeat, was kept by the Pope in his ever-expanding Vatican collections.²

Raphael's altarpiece, originally commissioned by Abbess Battista Alfani in 1505, has since the nineteenth century onwards received ample scholarly attention, mostly because of the fame of its author and the extant complete contract for the work, not to mention the still unresolved question of the motivation for the division of its panels.³

The Poor Clares' struggle to obtain the altarpiece in the first place (it took over two decades to reach their church) and the failure to recover it in the nineteenth century, are critical aspects of its controversial history, but have remained on the

¹ *Memoriale di Monteluca: Cronaca del monastero delle Clarisse di Perugia dal 1448-1838*, ed. U. Nicolini, transcr. Sr. Lainati, Santa Maria degli Angeli, Porziuncola, 1983, p. 604 (in what follows as *Memoriale*). I would like to thank my supervisor Prof. Barbara Baert, Prof. Giovanna Casagrande, Emma Grootveld and the community of S.M. di Monteluca at S. Erminio, especially sister Monica Benedetta Umiker, for their advice during the writing of this paper.

² *Memoriale*, p. 587.

³ A.M. Sartore, "'Begun by Master Raphael": The Monteluca Coronation of the Virgin', in: *The Burlington Magazine* 153 (2010), p. 387. The information available in primary and secondary documents regarding this painting is extensive. For the original contract(s) see *Memoriale*, pp. 39, 86, 96, 103-104, 115, 127, 133, 149 and, p. 755. For the earliest writing on the painting, see U. Gnoli, 'Raffaello e la Incoronazione di Monteluca (nuovi documenti)', in: *Bollettino d'arte* 11 (1917), pp. 133-154. For the contract see J. Shearman, *Raphael in Early Modern Sources, 1483-1602*, London, Yale University Press, 2003, pp. 752-55. For the importance of the contract in relation to patronage see C. Gardner von Teuffel, 'Clerics and Contracts: Fra Angelico, Neroccio, Ghirlandaio and Others: Legal Procedures and Renaissance High Altarpieces in Central Italy', in: *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 62, 2 (1999), pp. 190-208. For an explanation of the division of the altarpiece to better accommodate the carrying of the work to Florence when Raphael moved there from Perugia later in the year 1505, T. Henry, 'Raphael's Siege of Perugia', in: *The Burlington Magazine* 146 (2004), pp. 745-748. For the specification of certain colours by the nuns of Monteluca, T. McGrath, 'Color and Exchange of Ideas between Patron and Artist in Renaissance Italy', in: *The Art Bulletin* 82 (2000), pp. 298-308. The most extensive bibliography was published by Shearman, *Raphael*, cit.

fringes of academic research. Nonetheless, the recurrent struggle provides an interesting insight into the Perugian community; the long awaited arrival of the painting in 1525 was the crowning achievement of both the advent of observance (strict adherence to the Franciscan rule) at Monteluca itself, and the success of its activities as a reforming convent in its own right. The subsequent loss of the painting to the French and the many efforts described in the chronicle to retrieve it display both the determination to regain what was rightfully theirs and an ultimate acceptance, albeit with regret, as hinted at by Taccini, of the control of the Papal authority that had governed these enclosed women since the founding of their order.⁴ The Raphael, at the centre of the altarpiece controversy, casts a looming shadow; one that Monteluca has had difficulty escaping. It has created an invisible boundary, preventing further and more thorough scholarly research on periods earlier than the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, periods that, when unwrapped, reveal a rich visual history, reaching back to the origins of the thirteenth-century Perugian convent.

This article, combining iconographical observations and a close reading of the Monteluca chronicle, an important primary document that was written from 1448 onwards,⁵ aims to take a first step in unwrapping this visual history, delving deeper into the contemplative, devotional and art historical past of a convent that has, since the mid thirteenth century, played a crucial role in Franciscan monastic life in Umbria.⁶ More generally, it seeks to contribute to an active body of research on

⁴ For the notion of the nuns as patrons, see Shearman, *Raphael*, cit., p. 752-55 and also Sartore, 'Begun by Master Raphael', cit., p. 387. For the efforts to retrieve the painting from the Vatican see *Memoriale*, p. 594, 602 and 604. Also mentioned by G. Briganti, 'Due Opere Pittoriche di Raffaello Sanzio e Notizie Storiche nelle Cronache delle Clarisse dell'Umbria', in: *Studi Francescani* 85 (1988), p. 84. The nuns requested the return of the painting in 1824 and were promised that the authorities would occupy themselves with the request. In 1830 they received an offer of three thousand scudi for the painting. The nuns refused. The answer was a new offer of one thousand scudi and a copy of the painting. The nuns, prompted by fear of losing everything, finally accepted the offer and the copy arrived at Monteluca on 18 August 1831. Although the nuns are mentioned as the patrons of the Raphael, none of the authors has examined the community as patrons of the arts.

⁵ In her book on conventual chronicles, Kate Lowe elaborates on the importance of the chronicle, in which conventual communities meticulously noted down their daily activities including financial matters, entries of novices, visitations, etc. K.J.P. Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter Reformation Italy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

⁶ For further reading on the façade and other Umbrian religious houses, such as S. Francesco al Prato, see: F. Grispo, 'Il Quadrellato Perugino nelle facciate gotiche delle chiese di Perugia', in: P. Messa and M.B. Umiker (eds.), *Non un grido, non un lamento: La soppressione del Monastero di Monteluca di Perugia* [Atti della V giornata di studio sull'osservanza Franciscana al femminile, 12 maggio 2010 Monastero Clarisse S. Maria di Monteluca in S. Erminio, Perugia], Assisi, Edizione Porziuncola, 2011, pp. 127-134. Nuns have become a topic of great interest to scholars since the 1990s in various disciplines. Examples, by no means exhaustive are: J. Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent*, London, University of California Press, 1997; J. Hamburger and S. Marti (eds.), *Crown and Veil: Female Monasticism from the Fifth to the Fifteenth Centuries*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2008; K.J.P. Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter Reformation Italy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998; A. Thomas, *Art and Piety in the Female Religious Communities of Renaissance Italy: Iconography, Space and Religious Women's Perspective*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003; G. Zarri, *Women and Faith: Catholic Religious Life in Italy from Late Antiquity to the Present*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 1999; C. van Wyhe, *Female Monasticism in Early Modern Europe: An Interdisciplinary View*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2008. For the Poor Clares in particular, see the work by Caroline Bruzelius, among others, C. Bruzelius, 'Nuns in Space: Strict Enclosure and the Architecture of the Clarisses in the Thirteenth Century', in I. Peterson (ed.), *Clare of Assisi: A Medieval and Modern Woman*, St. Bonaventure, Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University, 1993, pp. 53-74.

monastic life and the arts, whilst looking further than the over-studied centres of Rome, Venice and Florence.⁷

The focus of this paper lies beyond the medieval façade of Monteluce, in the space that used to function as the nuns' choir. This space, I will argue, more than any other within the convent, should be seen as a post-reform area further encouraging *clausura*. The fresco cycle in the choir, which precedes the Reform of 1448, exemplifies how the devotional mission of the Clares is mirrored not only in the texts they read, but also in the pictorial art embellishing their space of religious practice. The continuity of space and practice was further enhanced by adaptations after the Reform, which demonstrate how devotional developments were also followed by architectural modifications.

Reading and Seeing: The Nuns' Choir at Santa Maria di Monteluce, 1330s-1451

Invisible yet present, the choir, where sacred and lay were separated by no more than a wall, presented the weakest link in terms of accessibility to the inner realm of the convent. The nuns, who gathered here for Divine Office, would experience a highpoint in their daily devotions by observing the elevated host, at times seen or unseen, through an opening in the altar wall. In turn, the lay audience in search of weekly salvation would be accompanied in their contemplation by the beautiful singing voices from within the choir. Music constituted both an act of prayer for these devout women and an element of prestige: musical skills were valuable to convents in that they could profoundly influence the urban interest in religious houses, attracting patronage and raising the bar when it came to the price of dowries for entry.⁸ Because of the almost shared experience of lay and sacred, it was paramount that the choir, of all places within the internal layout of the conventual space, emphasised the nuns' identity as 'Brides of Christ', not only through spiritual texts that were read and sung, but also through images, as will briefly be explored below.

The *Coro delle monache* at Monteluce appears as a retro-choir, found also at the early fourteenth-century grand convent of S. Chiara in Naples, behind the outer church and the shared altar wall. The choir at Monteluce is about one third of the size of the lay church, and functioned as a gathering place for the nuns at least since the fourteenth century.⁹

In the frescoes on the south wall of the choir space, packed against the East wall, a number of saints considered important to the Franciscan faith can be recognized, accompanied by miniature Poor Clares. Here, compassionate and affective devotion to the passion of Christ and the commitment to lead a simple, poor life is essential. Among others SS. Francis, Anthony Abbott, John the Baptist and Michael remind us of the profound messages religious women may have had to contemplate during the hour of Divine Office - issues of death, sin, rebirth, and

⁷ The recent conference 'Sister Act: Female Monasticism and the Arts across Europe, ca. 1250-1550' held at the Courtauld (London, 13-14 March 2015) attests to the continued interest in this particular field. Visual culture denotes both the traditional tripartite of painting, sculpture and architecture, and decorative arts.

⁸ S. Evangelisti, *Nuns, A History of Convent Life, 1450-1700*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 133. On religious women as witnessing or being kept by seeing the elevated host: C. Bruzelius, 'Queen Sancia of Mallorca and the Convent Church of Sta. Chiara in Naples', *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 40 (1995), p. 80. On music in the convent: C. Monson, *Disembodied Voices: Music and Culture in an Early Modern Italian Convent*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995. I further elaborate on this significant topic in my doctoral thesis.

⁹ The outer church of Santa Maria di Monteluce is 34 meters long, 12,65 meters wide and 11,80 meters high, see Messa and Umiker, *Non un grido*, cit., p. 127.

humility. The female martyrs, SS Catherine and Euphemia, connect the Poor Clare community of Monteluca to ancient saints, martyrs from the earliest centuries of Christianity. They offered an example to the community but also a certain prestige.

The reason for the inclusion of an Annunciation scene in the set of frescoes is evident, as Mary befits the community of Monteluca, dedicated to the Virgin, and was at the centre of an elaborate civic procession that gathered at the church each year on the fifteenth of August on the Feast of the Assumption.¹⁰ The choir space is decorated on the back of the altar wall with many other embellishments, but it is worth mentioning a poignant fresco of the apt Saint Clare guarding her flock, juxtaposed with a large central crucifixion, likely accompanied by figures at the foot of the cross and an Assumption at the right side of the crucifixion.

These fourteenth-century frescoes in the nuns' choir at Monteluca were certainly there before the reform of the fifteenth century. They were preserved during and after the Reform, reflecting the importance these frescoes had in this space for the contemplative nuns.

Ugolino Nicolini has shown that the space had a number of functions, serving, among others, as a scriptorium in the later fifteenth century, thus underlining the important presence of text in spaces of devotional practice.¹¹ The scribal qualities of several nuns are apparent throughout the Monteluca chronicle, especially the skilful talents of Sr. Battista Alfani, abbess of Monteluca (who was elected multiple times between 1491 and 1506). Battista wrote one Legend of Saint Clare with which she 'consoled' the sisters, as noted in the chronicle.¹² Battista's activities indicate what was at stake in a reformed community: through her writing she wanted to bring the sisters together and create unity at Monteluca. The inventory of documents taken away after the convent had been suppressed in the 1860s, found in the chronicle of Monteluca, counts thirty-nine folios containing spiritual and devotional volumes by authors such as the Franciscan Bernardino of Siena (1380-1444), Angela of Foligno (1248-1309), Ubertino of Casale (1259-1329) and Catherine of Bologna (1413-1463), as well as copies of work by Gregory the Great (540-604), and, among others, a prayer manual for the 'use of the sisters' dated to the fifteenth century.¹³ It is more than plausible that these treatises would have been used, in combination with an observance of the pictorial programme, to enhance contemplation and affective devotion within the choral area.¹⁴

As noted, text and image could illuminate the devotional behaviour of conventual women. One example of such text and image juxtapositions as an aid to the nuns' affective devotion could be derived from a reading of, for example, da

¹⁰ For the iconography: G. Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1954; For the procession: J.M. Wood, *Women, Art and Spirituality: The Poor Clares of Early Modern Italy*, Cambridge, 1996, Cambridge University Press, p. 106. A complete list of the frescoes on the South wall reads from left to right: Saint Francis receiving the stigmata, Saint Anthony Abbot, Saint Michael the Archangel, Saint John the Baptist, Saint Catherine of Alexandria, Saint Euphemia, Saint Eustace, and an Annunciation scene. On the back of the altar wall: a Deacon Saint, a Bishop Saint, Saint Clare and her flock, an Assumption of the Virgin with Christ, and what appears to be a Crucifixion. The frescoes have been tentatively dated by Todini, who attributes them to the Maestro dei Dossali di Subiaco; F. Todini, *La pittura umbra del Duecento al primo Cinquecento* vol I, Milan, Longanesi, 1989, p. 135.

¹¹ U. Nicolini, 'I Minori Osservanti di Monteripido e la scriptorium delle Clarisse di Perugia nei secoli XV e XVI', in: *Picenum Seraphicum* 9 (1971), p.120.

¹² *Memoriale*, p. 124.

¹³ *Ivi*, XXVII.

¹⁴ For the meaning of affective contemplation, S. McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion*, Pennsylvania, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010.

Casale's *Arbor Vitae*, present in Monteluca's library, in which the Franciscan author offers graphic descriptions of Christ's torn body and offers the figure of the Virgin as a model for the reader's response: 'Christ (remained) naked in full sight of the crowd and those who mocked him; as naked as he was when he came forth from the Virgin's womb'. The Virgin's suffering, in seeing her son, is used to provoke a literal, compassionate response from the reader, in this case a religious woman. As a Poor Clare, the nun was a spouse of Christ especially vulnerable to being moved by Christ's shaming.¹⁵ In 'partaking' in the Virgin's emotive response, the reader almost 'steps' into the scene through image and text. At Monteluca, the Virgin's image is pictorially represented in the choir on at least two occasions: in the Annunciation scene and the Assumption scene at the back of the altar wall. It is likely she also features at the foot of the cross, where she would allude to strong Marian devotion at Monteluca, but more research needs to be done to ascertain this.

Another example can be found in *On the Perfection of Life, addressed to Sisters*, written by the renowned thirteenth-century Franciscan theologian, Saint Bonaventure. Probably written at the request of a Poor Clare (likely Isabella, sister of Louis IX and abbess of the convent of Longchamp), the *Perfection* boasts scenes of the Passion, a Franciscan favourite, which are graphic. These scenes also introduce some of the images, key for the Poor Clares, which cross the threshold of the textual and the pictorial: the cross, the wood and the wounds of Christ. The reader is urged to vividly image the crucifixion and to identify with the suffering Christ with full emotional effort:

There (imaginatively at the foot of the cross) transformed into Christ by your burning love for the Crucified, pierced by the nails of the fear of God, wounded by the spear of super abounding Love, transfixed by the sword of intimate compassion, seek nothing, desire nothing, wish for no consolation, other than to be able to die with Christ on the cross.¹⁶

The pictorial division between the frescoes in fictive architectural barriers seen in the nuns' choir at Monteluca naturally resulted in a cartoon-like 'reading' of these images as 'scenes' in conjunction with the nun's consultation of the above mentioned literature.¹⁷ Text, image and devotion, as an important feature of Clarissan religious space, constitute a perfect circle in the choir of Monteluca.

Reforming the Poor Ladies: Architecture in Times of Clausura

This continuity between space and devotion in Monteluca evolved along with the changing vision of worship in the convent, and was reinforced during the reform of 1448. Reform of convents occurred for a variety of reasons. Corrupt abbesses, general misconduct, and lax behaviour were all factors, but equally reform could be deemed necessary due to a breach of *clausura*, the perpetual enclosure of all nuns across the Latin Church as ordained by Boniface VIII in 1298. Recent and enticing scholarship such as Monson's *Nuns Behaving Badly*, examines the 'outrageous' behaviour of a few Italian communities and gives a good impression of the scandals

¹⁵ McNamer, *Affective Meditation*, cit.; For the *Arbor Vitae*, see: U. da Casale, *Arbor Vitae Crucifixae Jesu*, transl. C.T. Davis, Turin, Bottega d'Erasmus, 1961.

¹⁶ S. Bonaventura, *On the Perfection of Life, Addressed to Sisters*, in: *The Works of Bonaventure*, transl. J. De Vink, Paterson, St Anthony Guild Press, 1960, pp. 209-255; Also quoted in McNamer, *Affective Meditation*, cit., p. 91.

¹⁷ A. Hoch, 'The "Passion" Cycle: Images to Contemplate and Imitate amid Clarissan Clausura', in: J. Elliott and C. Warr (eds.), *The Church of Santa Maria Donna Regina: Art, Iconography and Patronage in Fourteenth-Century Naples*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2004, pp. 129-153.

to which reforms would have been a natural reaction.¹⁸ At Santa Maria di Monteluca, however, reform was a more timid venture and seemingly not connected to scandal. The convent, deemed in need of change, was reformed in 1448, although the word scandal, as in some other communities, was never mentioned.

At Monteluca, it is likely that the convent was reformed because of a wish to return to the roots of the nuns' faith, in particular to the form of life that their founder, Santa Chiara, had envisioned for her 'poor ladies' as early as 1253.¹⁹ It could equally be argued that the reform at Monteluca took place in order to acquire the prestige that such reforms held for a community that since 1218 had governed much of the female religious life in Perugia. Additionally Monteluca, akin to a second Poor Clare motherhouse in the capital of the region, had attracted the pious attention of John of Capistrano, the charismatic Franciscan preacher who had initiated a wave of Franciscan reform, which commenced in Foligno and steadily made its way through Umbria in the fifteenth century.²⁰

Although primary documents on the Reform of 1448 remain scarce, we can measure the impact of the reform by exploring three historical elements. Firstly, Monteluca would become one of the great reformers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, sending off a number of their own flock to reform communities across the peninsula, which could point to Monteluca's pivotal and exemplary model. Secondly, some of the consequences and implications of the reform are displayed in the Monteluca chronicle, highlighting the internal concern for reflection on its importance. Thirdly, the reform was followed by an immediate reorganisation of the internal architecture of Monteluca, altered shortly after 1448 in order to better accommodate *clausura*.

After her arrival at Monteluca, the reforming abbess Margherita da Sulmona, accompanied by a number of other sisters such as the literary Cecilia Coppoli, was given the keys and seal of the convent and embarked on a major internal reform. This reorganisation would have a profound effect on the spatial and private existence of the Perugian nuns. Da Sulmona was well placed to carry out this type of project: she was the foundress and first abbess of Santa Lucia in Foligno, and would, after her term as abbess of Monteluca, move onto S. Cosimato in Rome, where she equally reformed that community of Poor Clares.²¹ Da Sulmona occupied herself with promoting the idea of community over individuality to her new flock. She pointed out to the reformed community that sleeping in a shared environment was necessary to live according to the rule of the order. Several small windows, still visible on the outside of the convent, between the cloister and the piazza, could be markers of what were originally single cells, as that external part of the thirteenth-century convent, albeit renovated in 1451, remains unaltered. This area was most probably knocked through into one continuous dormitory space, presumably with a separate area for the abbess, as the rule also dictated.²² Similarly the abbess instructed the sisters to dismantle several partitions in their garden. Rather than nuns 'owning'

¹⁸ C. Monson, *Nuns Behaving Badly: Tales of Music, Magic, Art and Arson in the Convents of Italy*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2010.

¹⁹ L.S. Knox, *Creating Clare of Assisi: Female Franciscan Identities in Later Medieval Italy*, Leiden, Brill, 2008, pp. 19-35.

²⁰ For the institutional history of Santa Maria di Monteluca: P. Höhler, 'Il Monastero delle Clarisse di Monteluca', in: R. Rusconi (ed.), *Il movimento religioso femminile in Umbria nei secoli VIII-XIV*, Perugia, Regione dell'Umbria, 1984, pp. 61-82; and also *Memoriale*, pp. 9-22.

²¹ A.E. Scandella (ed.), *Ricordanze del Monastero di S. Lucia in Foligno (Cronache 1424-1786)*, Assisi, Porziuncola, 1987, p. 5-6.

²² *Memoriale*, p. 9. Also see Messa and Umiker, *Non un grido*, cit., p. 129.

separate plots of land to cultivate their own produce, the abbess wanted to achieve a community in its daily labours and considered a communal garden another expression of this unity.²³

Many other changes noted in the chronicle create a clear image of the spatial divides that regulated relationships between ‘us’ and ‘them’, the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’: the installing of grilles, specifically ‘a small and round one’ in the confessional area (1451-1453) and a grille with window in the choir (1509) so the nuns ‘could see the Holy Sacrament’ elevated by the priest behind the altar in the lay church; wheels, or *ruote*, mentioned as, for example, ‘a small one in the confessional chapel controlled by the bishop’(1451-1453), for exchanging goods between the sacred world of the nuns and the earthly world outside.²⁴ These descriptions reflect a control of relationships that were framed by clausura.

Nowhere else is this division more clearly felt as in the nuns’ choir, where the community, in the case of the Poor Clares and taking local variations into account, would gather to celebrate the Divine Office up to nine times a day. Several scholars have pointed to the symbolic importance of architectural division in clausura, which enhances the idea of bodily preservation. Dawn Hayes has eloquently described this division by opposing images of sacred versus earthly, as the inside of the nuns’ choir contains the sacred bodies of the virgin nuns, whilst the outside contains the lay church as comprised of the sexual bodies of lay worshippers.²⁵ Caroline Bruzelius, in her discussion of thirteenth-century Poor Clare communities, speaks of the danger of the ‘permeability of the female body’, a body that was, in essence, considered as fragile and little able to ‘manage a wide range of stimuli’. The need for bodily enclosure of religious women was therefore clear: in order to be perceived as ‘sacred’, nuns required control and supervision in an enclosed space.²⁶ This controlled built space could signify the female body itself. The relationship between body and architectural openings had been explored by Jerome, who, as Bruzelius mentions, ‘refers to the five senses as the windows through which vice has access to the soul’.²⁷

Helen Hills equally reminds us that the architecture of enclosure could function as a metaphor for the performance of the virginal bodies that were hidden beyond the outsider’s view. Architecture represents behaviour, Hills argues; as such the penetration of the enclosure would effectively signify the penetration of the nuns’ body. Hills quotes Mary Douglas in her argument, stating that ‘we should expect the orifices of the body to symbolize its specifically vulnerable points. [...] The same holds true for architecture’.²⁸ Portals, the heavy wooden doors at the front of the convents, the grille in the *parlatoria*, the *ruote* through which goods were exchanged highlight the need, and probably desire, for the convent to retain contact with the

²³ *Ivi*, pp. 9-10

²⁴ For the grilles in the chronicle of Monteluce; *Memoriale*, p. 16, 96, 107, 120,128. For the doors, p. 328, 343 and the *ruote*, p.16 and p.251.

²⁵ D.M. Hayes, *Body and Sacred Place in Medieval Europe, 1100-1389*, London, Routledge, 2003, pp. 18-23.

²⁶ Bruzelius, *Nuns in Space*, cit., p. 68.

²⁷ *Ivi*, p. 69; For the female body in terms of architecture, Bruzelius quotes R.H. Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 32.

²⁸ H. Hills, *Invisible City: The Architecture of Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Neapolitan Convents*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 166; for Douglas, who was quoted by Hills: M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London, Routledge, 1966, p. 121. Also see C. Bruzelius ‘Hearing is Believing: Clarissan Architecture, ca. 1213-1340’, *Gesta* 31/2 (1992), pp. 83-91.

outside world. These orifices through which legitimate parties could enter were controlled by an architecture that focused on the elements symbolic of enclosure.²⁹ Although the separation of the choir was already common in medieval monastic churches, in this case it seems to respond to a particular attention for bodily reform in the fifteenth century.

This is, in short, an architecture of bodily imprisonment.³⁰ It equally served the male authorities, always on the look out for 'scandal', since the architecture enclosed and guaranteed, as it were, the sexual fidelity of nuns.³¹ The purity of the community was necessary to guarantee the continuing prestige of Perugia's civic elite such as the Alfani, Degli Oddi and Baglioni families, all of whom sent their daughters to Monteluce during its long history. It should equally be mentioned, as Marilyn Dunn has recently argued, that the inside/outside division was also an issue for visitors or viewers from the outside. The public or lay church represented the space between the cloister and the secular world. The art and architecture of this space, as Dunn explains, served to represent the public face of the convent. Metaphorically, the nuns, who were hidden from view, were present in the fabric of the lay church through commissions made by them, such as a Sacrament tabernacle from the Florentine sculptor Francesco di Simone Ferrucci.³² This tabernacle, together with a number of other object commissions ranging from reliquaries to mantles for Madonna statues, likely relate to the 1448 reform as well, representing change, as it were, to the civic community and the lay perspective. Reform hereby was not merely internally experienced but also externally perceived through the altered visual reality of the convent's appearance.³³

Returning finally to the commission that symbolises Monteluce in the most elaborate manner, we find again the image of the Coronation of the Virgin by Raphael. The Coronation, a celebratory subject for a conventual high altar, praises Mary as the Queen of Heaven and the pure Bride of Christ. The landscape below the crowning scene reminds us of the green belt of Italy that is Umbria. On the fifteenth of August every year at the Feast of the Assumption, the high altar of Monteluce reflects the abundance of flowers also found in the sarcophagus depicted by Raphael. The embellishments of the outer church in which the Assumption is the main 'actor' promote an image of the Virgin as 'Bride, Mother and Spouse', and so the outlook of the outer church becomes an expression of the ideology of the order of Poor Clares, Virgins consecrated to God's service and devoted both to Our Lady and their founder, Saint Clare.³⁴

And yet, when examining Monteluce beyond 'the' Raphael, a wealth of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century information can be uncovered, complementing current scholarship on female religiosity on the Italian peninsula in interesting ways. The combination of text, image and devotion, as well as the implications of the ideology of reform and clausura, have gained a physical form in the architectural fabric of Monteluce post 1448. As I have attempted to show, the complexity and art

²⁹ Hills, *Invisible City*, cit., p. 166

³⁰ *Memoriale*, p. 13.

³¹ R. Dressler, 'Gender as Spectacle and Construct: The Gyverney Effigies at St. Mary's Church, Limington', in: *Different Vision a Journal of New Perspectives on Medieval Art* 1 (2008), pp. 1-24.

³² M. Dunn, 'Invisibilia per visibilia: Roman Nuns, Art Patronage and the Construction of Identity', in: K. McIver (ed.), *Wives, Widows, Mistresses and Nuns in Early Modern Italy: Making the Invisible Visible through Art and Patronage*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2012, pp. 182-183

³³ For commissioned objects at Monteluce: *Memoriale*, pp. 330, 108, 167, 177, 201, 147.

³⁴ Wood, 'Women and Art', cit., p. 106.

historical wealth of this community has remained ‘covered’ by its principal masterpiece for too long.

Keywords

Nuns, choir, Late Medieval, Italy, devotion

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RIASSUNTO

Invisibile presenza

Il Coro delle Monache della Santa Maria di Monteluca a Perugia

Il presente articolo esplora il passato contemplativo, devozionale e storico-artistico delle Clarisse di Santa Maria di Monteluca a Perugia. La prestigiosa comunità in cima al monte è spesso stata menzionata alla luce del quadro ‘La Coronazione della Vergine’ di Raffaello. Tuttavia, questo *tour de force* artistico a parte, Monteluca è stato poco studiato dagli storici, sia nella sua qualità di principale riformatore quattrocentesco di monasteri femminili nella penisola italiana che per quanto riguarda la sua cultura visiva anteriore. Il presente articolo esaminerà brevemente le fonti testuali usate nella contemplazione quotidiana delle suore di Monteluca in giustapposizione con gli affreschi trecenteschi, finora trascurati. Nella seconda parte dell’articolo è studiata la concezione del coro del monastero alla luce dell’idea di clausura, la quale fu implementata ulteriormente nell’architettura dell’edificio dopo la riforma del 1448.



Fig. 1 Church of Santa Maria di Monteluce, 2014, image by author, Perugia.

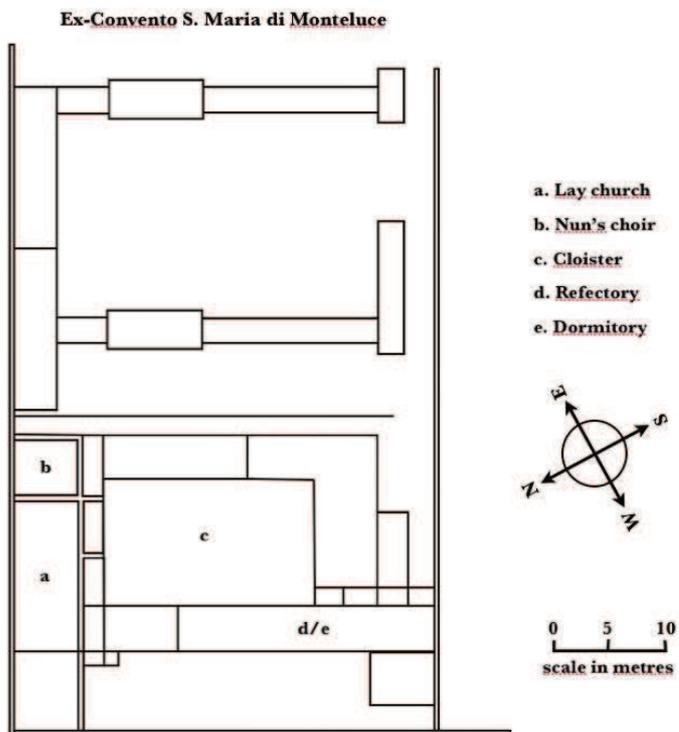


Fig. 2 Map of former convent of Santa Maria di Monteluce, 2014, plan by author, Perugia.



Fig. 3 Perugian School, Saint Anthony Abbott with a Poor Clare, c.1330-1350, fresco, Perugia/Santa Maria di Monteluca.



Fig. 4 Perugian school, Saint Catherine of Alexandria, c. 1330-1350, fresco, Perugia/Santa Maria di Monteluca.