

*Art and Observance in Renaissance Venice: The Dominicans and Their Artists (1391–ca. 1545)*. Denise Zaru.

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Denise Zaru has written *Art and Observance in Renaissance Venice* to fill a gap: while scholars have long recognized that the Church reforms of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries encouraged new kinds of devotional painting, no study, she argues, has looked specifically at the effects that the earlier Observance movement within the religious orders had on the visual arts. Zaru has chosen the Dominicans of Venice for her study, not only because Venice played an important role in the story of the Observance as the Italian city where the movement began in 1391, but also because here the tensions between supporters and opponents of the reform within the Dominicans' own ranks, as well as the complicated relationship between city authorities and the city's religious corporations, led the friars to exploit the visual art of persuasion in new ways. From an inventory she has made of all the paintings that were present in Venetian Dominican churches, Zaru has selected for analysis those she feels best illustrate the Dominicans'

artistic policy, as seen in three principal areas: female devotion, private devotion among the order's members, and public devotion in its political context.

A brief opening chapter sets the scene, introducing the four Dominican establishments in Venice: the important SS. Giovanni e Paolo, the lesser S. Domenico di Castello, S. Pier Martire out in the lagoon on Murano, and Corpus Domini, the women's convent. The second chapter examines what some of the most important advocates of the Observance in the Dominican order had to say about the use of images in cultivating piety, with sections on Giovanni Dominici, Tommaso Caffarini da Siena, and Antonino Pierozzi. Three chapters then pursue the proposed lines of inquiry. In chapter 3 the role played by paintings in shaping the devotional imagination of the Dominican nuns of Corpus Domini is considered, Zaru's argument being that the Observance encouraged a new relationship between the viewer and images of saints, in which the holy individual's sanctity is not so much to be venerated as to be imitated. This is exemplified by images of the newly canonized Catherine of Siena, whom the Venetian Dominicans depicted not in her mystical persona, but as a symbol of one of the core values of Observant religiosity, namely, *caritas*. This leads to chapter 4's consideration of how notions of "imitable sanctity" may explain the emergence in the fifteenth century of a new kind of devotional image, of which the Venetian Observants seem to have been the originators: portraits depicting living members of the order as Dominican saints, which Zaru counts as the most original contribution of the Observant Dominicans to the visual vocabulary. In chapter 5 the author explores how the Dominican friars of Venice used large-scale public paintings, especially altarpieces, to define themselves in the eyes of the faithful as ministers and saints who mediated between God and man — or, in the case of the Conventuals at SS. Giovanni e Paolo, who were resisting the reform, to proclaim their privileged relationship with the Venetian authorities.

*Art and Observance in Renaissance Venice* will find an interested readership among both art historians and historians of the Dominican order. It is an impressively documented study, reflected in the book's numerous appendixes and an apparatus of notes that provide lengthy excerpts from original sources. The author's greatest strength, in fact, lies in her marshaling of the many sources relevant to the individual works of art and their donors as she builds her hypotheses. The larger historical canvas does not fare quite so well, however, with broad brushstrokes and quick nods to events and theologies being allowed to serve most purposes; and there is little appreciation for the Dominicans' educational methods beyond the use of visual images. Consequently, the central ranges of the book read a bit too much like an annotated catalogue of the paintings, with the overarching narrative sometimes lost sight of. One would be forgiven for thinking, too, that Zaru has overstated her case about the complete lack of previous studies of the Observance and art, when we have William Hood's wonderful work on Fra Angelico at San Marco in Florence.

That said, Denise Zaru's book does illuminate some of the unique realities of religion, reform, and art in Renaissance Venice, as well as the role played by the Dominicans in

shaping Venetian devotion even as they shaped their own image for the Venetian public. It is a significant contribution; the census of paintings and gathering of archival records alone will make it a valuable resource for anyone who works on Venice's cultural history in this period.

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