



Fig. 1. Jacopo Tintoretto, *The Temptation of St Anthony*, San Trovaso, Venice, oil on canvas, c. 1577. Wikimedia commons.

Bokrecension – Book Review

Minna Hamrin: *Picturing Carnal Temptation and Sin in Italian Post-Tridentine Imagery*. Dissertation, Åbo Akademi University, 2018. 269 pp., 96 illust. ISBN 978-951-765-913-0. Digital version ISBN 978-951-765-914-7.

In the Venetian church of San Trovaso dedicated to the early Christian martyrs Gervase and Protase, an altarpiece by Tintoretto represents another saint from the same period, Anthony Abbot, though of a very different strand of Catholic piety (fig. 1). Anthony Abbot was the first of the Christian desert fathers, who dedicated his life to solitary prayer as a hermit in the Egyptian Sahara, and whose example was considered the foundation of monasticism. According to his biographies, St Anthony suffered and overcame torments of demonically-inspired carnal temptation in the form of phantasmagorical figures appearing to him in his solitude. Thus Tintoretto paints the Saint flanked on every side by demons of his imagination: two

hair twined into intricate braids but also small devil's horns. Above and below, male horned figures contribute to the torment by pulling at Anthony's draperies. Yet Tintoretto's St Anthony, in imitation of the Risen Christ, strides from them with his eyes fixed heavenward on the approaching godhead, his head bathed in the divine light of a radiant halo. Commonly dated to 1577, and placed in the church as it was being rebuilt in these same years, both the painting and the building are monuments to a renewed Catholicism in the period immediately after the Council of Trent. The Tridentine church promulgated its early Christian history including its saints and their *exempla* of faith, to purge the church of a perceived Renaissance worldliness. Annibale Carracci's engraving after Tintoretto's composition testifies to the ready exchange between painting and



Minna Hamrin
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 in Italian Post-Tridentine Imagery



Fig. 2. The cover image shows a detail of an illustration in Giacomo Franco's St Francis Exemplary Chastity, published in 1593. Orig. photo Istituto Storico Cappuccini, Museo Francese, Rome.

print in the visual communication of a militant Tridentine piety.

Minna Hamrin's Ph.D analyses the iconographic motif of carnal temptation in religious art of the Catholic Tridentine church in Italy, c. 1550–1700. It is specifically of saints, such as Anthony Abbot, as they experienced and overcame desire, whether real or imagined. The majority of the works under discussion comprise painting and prints – chiefly engravings

for illustrated books of saints' lives, and frescoed monastic mural cycles – demonstrating the close proximity between these media in Tridentine hagiographic imagery. While the analysis includes some well-known altarpieces such as Tintoretto's, the majority of the images are little known, even recondite. Thus, the weight of the research rests on the collection of an extensive range of virtually unknown representations of an iconographic motif. It

is the first comprehensive treatment of the temptation motif in the lives of the saints, in both word and image.

The study is fundamentally Warburgian in methodological approach in its focus on the Tridentine revival of the carnal temptation motif from a much earlier moment of church history. The subject matter is, in many ways, a survival from another episteme, that of the early Christian hermit saints and their legacy as a continuing inspiration to the Christian monastic movement. The material is therefore riven with historical fracturing over time. Such anachronistic analyses were of particular interest to art and cultural historian Aby Warburg, in mapping how iconographic signs move between epochs and cultures, to trace the shifting semantic changes of meaning over time and place. It is thus a study of temporal shifts and the migration of symbols within the complexities of the history of Christianity writ large.

The question posed by the thesis concerns the significance of the temptation motif for Tridentine Catholicism. It therefore considers who saw these images, and in what capacity. The historical reading offers us reasons for the existence of this imagery within the great tensions of religious culture in an age of upheaval and reform. The chapters treat individual chosen saints in-depth – St Anthony Abbot, St Benedict, St Francis of Assisi – while others give an overview of Tridentine imagery based on the lives of early saints such as Eligius, as well as those inspired by their example in resisting the furies of tempta-

tion such as St Philip Neri. A further chapter focuses on stories of saints' encounters with prostitutes, and the wide range of responses this produced, from intense self-mortification of the flesh to the celebrated instances of their successful conversion and penitence in imitation of the story of the Magdalen.

The imagery at stake in this study has been neglected by art historians because many of the representations are rather crude, often a direct translation of a textual source, with results that may be termed visually prosaic. Much of the frescoed examples are highly inaccessible, located in remote monasteries. They are often by unknown local artists, many of whom were monks themselves, who painted the lives of the saints for their monastic community based on the illustrated scenes of printed hagiographies. Within monastic settings such fresco murals were intended for closed audiences of resident monks only. Engraved illustrations for books of saints' lives clearly had a broader circulation, but certainly among their audiences were monks and churchmen, using them in monastic and ecclesiastical libraries. In both cases, a primary audience for the imagery – although not exclusive in the case of books – was clerical and monastic.

Our scholarly understanding of Tridentine culture on the role of images has tended to focus on the use of art to instruct the laity in the tenets of faith. Consequently, our emphasis has been on works within churches, which were understood as a primary means of instructing con-

gregations in the doctrinal articles promulgated by Trent and were therefore subject to intensive review by the church in the wake of Tridentine reform. As part of this aim, the church revived a programme of visits to churches to safeguard all imagery in accordance with a Catholic decorum. This was to ensure correct representation of church doctrine including strict avoidance of anything that might be understood as lascivious. Famously, some of Caravaggio's church commissions are generally understood to have been rejected for this reason, notably in the case of the *Madonna dei Palafrenieri*. The place of nudity and partial nudity in the depiction of figures of temptation preying on these saints is therefore difficult to place in terms of its role within Catholicism at this time. Importantly, this heretofore neglected iconographic evidence complicates our understanding of Catholic Tridentine visual culture and calls for a reconsideration of scholarly interpretations.

At the core of this imagery is both a defence and a strengthening of the rule of clerical celibacy. This was an ideal from the earliest days of Catholicism, springing from a complex legacy of antique beliefs and practices, comprising the philosophical tenets of Platonism and Stoicism. The chaste male body was always recognised as a spiritual ideal to aspire to and strive for, while acknowledged as arduous, subject to human frailty, and requiring an extreme discipline of mind and body. Like sainthood itself, clerical celibacy was rejected by Protestant sects as too precarious.

Thus the Catholic church in this period, in defence of its cardinal beliefs, deployed an iconography to celebrate and promulgate the celibate ideal of sanctity as holy men suffered and fought to keep their bodies chaste.

Among the highest of pious outcomes in these scenarios, much valorised in text and image alike, was the conversion of prostitutes to repentance as exemplified in the lives of St Francis of Assisi and St Philip Neri in imitation of Christ and Mary Magdalen. This also reinforced a further Catholic doctrine under attack by Protestantism, namely, the efficacy of good works as a means to salvation. In these episodes, viewers were instructed not only in the saintliness of celibacy, but also in the task of conversion. With the loss of northern Europe to Protestantism, the Catholic church placed a new emphasis on evangelism in the wake of Trent, sending missionaries to all parts of the globe to spread the good word. Nor did the church omit the importance of the work of mission at home in the streets of Rome, as St Philip Neri epitomised, dedicating his life to strengthening the faith among the poor and the fallen in the holy city itself. In the case of St Francis, and thereafter in his image also, the parallel with the story of Christ's conversion of the Magdalen is particularly pronounced. The Franciscan theme of *'imitatio Christi'*, which later accounts of such stories also reinforced, was of seeking to live a life in Christ, fully in imitation of his holy suffering, but also of his compassion. It is particularly the Tridentine reviv-

al of the Franciscan episode of temptation and conversion that forms an important cornerstone of Hamrin's project. The episode reveals a new emphasis on the theme of temptation within the hagiographies as a significant aspect of Catholic Reform culture and belief.

The lack of artistic recognition is not the only reason for our current neglect of this imagery; it is also inherent to the subject matter, which is difficult, even disturbing, today. Many of the stories comprise holy men subjecting themselves to extreme forms of mortification of the flesh in order to overcome their carnal desires. They are depicted casting themselves naked onto burning coals, beds of nettles or thorns, or into snow, or piercing their bodies with snake bites to banish their thoughts of desire. Other scenes depict them fiercely, at times brutally as with Eligius, fighting off the advances of those, understood as demons, who have been sent to tempt them in the form of courtesans, prostitutes, or nymphs. These stories depict not only castigating forms of self-harm, but also aggression towards others. Much of the imagery would appear designed to inculcate virtue through a form of social intolerance in the name of faith, and to justify it through acts that comprise often violent reprisals, certainly a deep divisiveness, and radical 'othering'.

Moreover, the imagined demons of temptation, although predominantly embodied as women, were not exclusively so. A number are male, of a type that may be termed the abject and brutalised poor,

such as beggars; and in the form of satyrs that are both signs and objects of an unbridled desire. The saints that are represented as experiencing temptation are, however, exclusively male; this paradigm does not appear in the iconography of female saints with the exception of some very early desert saints, which importantly is not repeated in Tridentine accounts: The Warburgian question of the recurrence of the early Christian temptation motif in Tridentine Catholicism thus becomes the attribute of an 'heroic', exclusively masculine, sanctity.

The subject raises big questions about faith and belief, narrative and imagery, the tensions between social discipline and human sexuality, and their significance for the history of Christianity more broadly and particularly in the age of Catholic Reform in the wake of Trent. The study thus concerns a key aspect of Catholic thought, reinforced by Trent, of the fallibility of the flesh, and the role of the saints' lives in teaching models of disciplining desire. The thesis does not shy from highlighting the difficulties attending the depiction of this motif. In this respect, it judiciously walks a fine line. It opens up the discussion with a statement on the larger issues the material raises in relation to constructs of masculinity and of women. This is significant, not so much in the (historically unsurprising) manifestation of intolerant misogyny within early modern Catholicism, but in the recognition of these issues within imagery that has slipped below scholarly notice, to show its deep reach into the history



Fig. 3. Martin Schongauer, *The Temptations of St Anthony*, copper plate engraving, 1470s. Wikimedia commons.

of faith. It brings home an understanding of the pervasiveness of these difficult concepts in shaping many myriad aspects of the cultural history of belief.

For the demons that the hermit saints fought were not so much the temptations of sexual encounters with others, but of their own mental preoccupation. The strange stories of the hermit saints' lives,

one of intensive ascetic prayer in the wilderness in which, as Edward Gibbon pointed out long ago, they were surely living at the edge of starvation, have come down to us as accounts of a state of mind. This hagiographic legacy is concerned above all with the power of a mental imaging, the capacities of the wandering mind to lead the body astray. It is a fear of the powers

of the mind to lead us into places unbidden, as the Renaissance printmaker Martin Schongauer (fig. 3) represented in an engraving of St Anthony Abbot's 'demons' as whirlings of the imagination, which the young Michelangelo would then imitate in paint. In this regard it is signal to remember that Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic project was founded in his own formation in classical iconography. To return to the question of the survival of the stories of the early Christian saints into the Tridentine era, what the thesis evidences is the manner in which this legacy is taken up by later saints such as Francis of Assisi and Philip Neri. But these were saints of the city, not hermits, so their accounts differ in important respects from those of the early desert fathers. The presence of the Renaissance courtesan type now seems to conflate with that of the ancient nymph.

We are thus looking at many layers of history. As Jean Seznec and others of Warburg's generation have taught us, we see the survival of the ancient gods within the history of Christianity, shifting and changing with historical circumstance through the late medieval explosion of monasticism, into the perceived corruption and worldliness of the Renaissance church, and into the age of inquisitorial Tridentine reform. The tensions within these images reflect the conflicts of culture attending vast historical change from early Christianity to Trent and beyond. It is, then, from the outset, entwined and beset with the larger legacy of the cultures of antiquity, both the Stoic and Platonic,

but also the rustic bacchanalia of Pan. For the demons that plagued the desert fathers, with cloven hooves and horns, are surely in Warburgian terms *survivances* of the pan-like *panisci* of antique art and texts, figurations of the deep anxieties of the mind surrounding its desires. Through this at times deeply strange iconography of the heroically chaste male body, we are able to tap into questions of historical survival, the role of narrative and the power of imagery as 'condensations' of history. Trent remobilised these stories from early Christianity for reasons of the present, even if it could not altogether command the fullness of their historical memory, or its wider significance. The puzzling nature of this iconography surely exceeded the Tridentine moment of its strategic deployment. We can perhaps see it best as a marker of the power of imagery to be both shaped and to shape present historical circumstance but also, in often uncanny ways, to confound and exceed it.

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Note. An article on the subject has been published in Swedish, in ICO nr 1, 2015, pp. 46–69: Minna Hamrin, "S. Franciskus och kyskhetens ikonografi" (Saint Francis and the Iconography of Chastity). See homepage: <https://ojs.abo.fi/ojs/index.php/ico/article/view/939>