

Revising Devotion: the role of wooden sculptures in affecting painting and
devotion in the Late Medieval period in Italy (XII-XV century)

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Abstract

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This dissertation offers a reconsideration of medieval wooden sculptures and a new perspective for understanding their role in affecting devotion and pictorial production in late medieval and Renaissance culture. My study focuses on the diffusion and use of the sculptures from the group of the Descent from the Cross through the development of the animated sculptures of Christ from around 1100 to around 1560.

Historically these objects have been considered principally as devotional objects and utilized to understand devotional practices and ceremonies; conversely, I assert that they represented the catalyst of a new, unfiltered experience of the sacred in which the laity were able to access and shape a powerful and direct relationship with the human side of Christ, eluding the controlling role of the Church.

Even if the iconography of these sculptures did not bring anything new in comparison with their pictorial counterpart, I argue that the utilization of these sculptures guaranteed a connection with the divine through physicality and the ability to create a spatial experience of the sacred. The devotional use of these

sculptures contributed to an identification of the faithful with the scene, which allowed devotees to begin to stand in for the characters in the Descent from the Cross. As a consequence the faithful created a dimension in which they were real participants in the scene, transcending time and space rather than creating a mere reenactment of this dramatic moment of the Passion of Christ. The distinctive media, qualities and adornments that these sculptures had endorsed them to become real in front of the faithful in a way that was not possible to replicate with the pictorial medium. This new relationship with the sculptures and the creation of a real sacred scene in which the faithful participated, I argue, greatly influenced the pictorial medium, especially in the shift toward a more naturalistic representation of the sacred scene during the later Middle Ages and beginning of the Renaissance. Painters translated visually what they experienced in the contemporary devotional context of this new, compelling, effective and physical relationship between sculptures and faithful, because of their conviction that what they witnessed could be understood to be real and authentic, not a mere representation. As a consequence sculptures attained such an important role in promoting the experience of the sacred that wooden representations of the body of Christ were treated and identified as if they were the real human body of Christ.

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- Fig 29 – Benedetto da Maiano, *Crucifix*, end of 15th century, painted wood, Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of the Mendicant Orders, particularly with the founding of the Dominican Order in 1216 and the Franciscan Order in 1223, and the rise of various penitential confraternities—groups of laymen and women that together re-enacted the different moments of the Passion of Christ¹ - resulted in a range of unique practices that encouraged devotion and promoted charity among the laity during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in central Italy. *Flagellants* practiced an extreme mortification of their own flesh, the *Laudesi* promoted hymns through singing, and members of the *Confraternity of the Rosary* prayed the entire Holy Rosary weekly. These examples reflect some of the wide range of unique devotional practices that encouraged devotion and promoted charity among the laity throughout Italy—and beyond—over the subsequent centuries. As a result, the associated artistic commissions and the use of art, both by Mendicant Orders and lay confraternities, contributed to the religious, devotional and artistic life of Late Medieval Italy.

In particular, carved and polychrome wooden sculptures, such as the Crucified Christ, the Dead Christ, and Descent from the Cross groups, were significant because they reflect the devotional practices of the Late Medieval period and they are indicative of the changes in religious observation in wake of popular piety at the time. They were made not only to provide an artwork for a sacral space

¹ Barbara Wisch, and Diane Cole Ahl. *Confraternities and the Visual Arts in Renaissance Italy: Ritual, Spectacle, Image*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 13.

that represented a specific moment from the life of Christ, but also served a ritual function and provided a distinct experience of the sacred. They were often used as processional sculptures that had specific physical features, such as being extremely lifelike or having movable limbs, that made them unique and differentiated them from other kinds of artwork in portraying and embodying the holy.

The intention of this dissertation is to reevaluate the role of these sculptures more completely within the art historical discourse and its critical perspectives, drawing on a multidisciplinary set of sources. Traditionally these sculptures have been considered mostly as devotional objects or as evidence for other aspects of the devotional practices such as liturgy, para-liturgical ceremonies and the contemporary literary production of the period. Conversely, I argue that these sculptures need a more detailed study and a larger context in which they can be reconsidered in order to understand their role and importance.

A study that can be considered as a successful example of this approach is Susan Verdi Webster's *Art and Ritual in Golden-Age Spain: Sevillian Confraternities and the Processional Sculptures of Holy Week* (1998), in which she asserts the technically excellent and superb craft with which these objects were made. Her study analyzes the relationship between the Sevillian Confraternities and the processional sculptures of the Holy Week and how these objects were utilized and, above all, activated while carried in processions; especially because the presence of the faithful during these processions was fundamental for the performance of these

sculptures. She highlights how this craftsmanship was specifically meant for their ritual functions and how these carved wood objects would become the catalyst of a powerful and moving experience for the faithful.² Susan Verdi Webster presents an interesting approach to reevaluate these sculptures and the performative role in conjunction with the presence and role of the audience during the processions for the Holy Week. This study provides a strong starting point from which to reconsider the sculptures produced during the medieval period.

The Descent from the Cross as an iconographical subject was not new in art. It is known from manuscript illuminations and paintings, for example. However, in the context of Late Medieval devotion, which saw the rise of the mendicant orders and lay confraternities, life-like and often animated sculptural representations of Christ not only reflected changes occurring in Late Medieval devotional practices but also influenced them. This is an aspect that has been undervalued in scholarship. In this study, I focus on how Descent from the Cross sculptural groups, in particular, transformed from merely representing a specific moment from the Passion of Christ into enacting a dimension of extra-temporal reality. I argue that the creation of these sculptures initiated a powerfully affective way of perceiving and living the sacred. The Late Medieval relationship of the faithful before the body of Christ in sculptural form impacted the ways that artworks portraying moments from the life of Christ in other media were perceived, represented, and symbolized, as well. Also, because of the features of these sculptures and their performative functions, these

² Susan Verdi Webster, *Art and Ritual in Golden-Age Spain : Sevillian Confraternities and the Processional Sculpture of Holy Week* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 8.

objects created unprecedented direct access to the sacred for groups of lay people that dramatically impacted the experience of what was holy. Previously, this relationship was only accessible to the clergy. This shift was extremely critical because it influenced the art production of the period and the way the faithful perceived and approached both the life of Christ and the representation of it.

I argue that the intrinsic features of these sculptures, such as verisimilitude and life-size scale, were important starting points for the beholders' heightened engagement and self-identification with the objects. Although often creating an emotional response specifically during Holy Week celebrations, I argue that their presence inside the church already existed as a powerful medium for devotion and identification that would last all year long, affecting the faithful's perception of the sacred and the sacred object.

As a consequence, a pivotal point for this study, along with the attention to the objects themselves, is going to be a careful consideration of the relationship between the viewer and the image, especially for those sculptures whose function extended beyond static display to induce a very active response by their beholders. David Freedberg, in his study *The Power of Images*, discusses such relationships between the beholder and the image, noting that "such a view of response is predicated on the efficacy and the effectiveness (imputed or otherwise) of images."³

Both the clergy and faithful from the audience interacted with and animated these sculptures in different ways, and the meaning of these interactions has never

³ David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), xxii.

been stable. More specifically, this relationship changed through times and among the different individuals that found themselves in front of these objects.

Additionally, because the role of these sculptures is predominately performative, we cannot rely only on the symbolic meaning of what they represent. Instead, they are the result of the different and endless ways that clergy and lay people, collectively and individually, engaged with the sculptures symbolically, materially, and, above all, physically. The power of these sculptures lies in their capability to engage the divine through physicality with their ability to involve the beholder fully; beholders' interactions with the sculptures extended well beyond mere spectatorship.

Especially during the procession of Holy Week, the crowd participated on two levels. "On one level, they participated as the historical crowd that witnessed the events of Christ's Passion, and on the other level their emotional engagement with and response to the processions dissolved the distinction between the audience and event, producing a hybridized status in which they were simultaneously observers, participants, and protagonists."⁴

These sculptures have the capability to be ontologically both in the past and in the present. They represent a historical event, but the utilization of the sculptures transcends the simple categories of time and place, and the mere reenactment becomes "reality" and truth. In this specific context, the sculptures were in a sense 'activated', and they moved the spectators toward a more direct devotion and

⁴ Susan Verdi, Webster, *Art and Ritual in Golden-Age Spain: Sevillian Confraternities and the Processional Sculpture of Holy Week*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 165.

engagement. I show how the combination of the physical realism with the functional use of these sculptures made these artworks a distinctive devotional artform that completely differentiated itself from painting and other devotional objects, and at the same time became the medium to fully understand the crucial points of the Christian faith.

This study shows how sculpture, in fact, preceded painting in the decisive move toward increasing mimeticism during the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and how the combination of the media (that is, how sculpture was painted and adorned to make it as lifelike as possible) made it an all-encompassing art that was deeply compelling for beholders.

This dissertation contributes to the reevaluation of medieval wooden sculpture in the context of the culture of medieval art. Many of the examples being considered are unattributed or by anonymous artists, while some were executed by prominent sculptors such as Giovanni Pisano, Donatello and Brunelleschi. More the case with the former category than those made by well-known sculptors, the critical assessment of many of these works has been generally negative or, at best, overlooked. When they are considered on par with the aesthetic quality of sculptures made in marble or bronze, the excessive realism and other additions—such as clothing and devotional objects—are often cited as characteristics that render them “impure” or “inappropriate” for serious scholarly attention.⁵

⁵ Webster, 7-8.

However, it is precisely the ongoing maintenance and additions made to these works that inform my research. I am interested in more broadly considering how these works act as a cultural carrier of meaning, rather than primarily within their aesthetic context. For style as a cultural carrier of meaning I intend that these sculptures meant something deeper than just representing the Descent from the Cross in a different medium. In fact, I argue that the iconography was not new, and, at times, draws upon existing painted examples of this moment from the Passion of Christ. The wooden groups of the Descent, however, are not to be considered as replicas of painted versions in three-dimensional form. These sculptures, through their distinctive media, qualities and adornments, became real to the people who witnessed them in a manner that existing two-dimensional representations did not. As devotional objects, they recreate the reality of the original moment of the Descent from the Cross through the real presence of life-size sculpture. Drawing on the critical notion of the “anachronic” life of the object, they permitted the beholder to connect the present moment of the celebration, experienced through the sculpture, with its original event.⁶ I argue that subsequent changes to the works—including adornments, damage and wear caused by their active devotional use, or repainting and overpainting—should not be considered as deteriorations of an original state, but as indicators of their importance and ongoing devotional function. The Descent from Cross groups and, perhaps even more the subsequent animated sculptures of the crucified Christ that began to appear around 1300, are objects that,

⁶ Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York : Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books ; Distributed by MIT Press, 2010), 7-19.

through their continual dialogue with the contemporary faithful in presenting the original moment of the Descent from the Cross, have necessitated alteration in order to “belong to more than one historical moment.”⁷ In this context, we can reevaluate the idea of style and how it intertwines with the function through the centuries and how this makes these artworks unique and worthy of investigation.

Iconographical readings within the devotional context of the Middle Ages assist in the evaluation of the liturgical functions of the sculptures. While previous scholarship has primarily focused on style and iconography,⁸ more recent work has been broadening the discourse in order to further our understanding of the objects. Indeed the very ‘style’ of these works, if understood in context, reveals itself to be a powerful point of significance, responding to and enhancing the corporeal effectiveness of sculptures of the suffering or the dead Christ when they operate at the center of the Holy Week processions and the re-enactment of the moments of the Passion. In this reading, style is critical, but the focus of analysis is no longer aesthetic appreciation but rather its intersection with function and culture. The increased lifelikeness achieved through polychrome realism in these sculptures fulfilled the changing devotional desires of the faithful, and, in turn, increased the emotional experiences of the participants in ritual. Subsequently, the sculptures became increasingly mimetic and “authentic” as a response to their reception in order to fulfill the modes of use. Approaching these sculptures in a broader

⁷ Ibidem., 30-31.

⁸ Henk Van Os, *The Art of Devotion in the Late Middle Ages in Europe, 1300-1500*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 8.

perspective will allow one to view them in the “activated” context that they were intended for and allow the possibility to consider them in relation to current interests in anthropology, performance, and materiality. I will consider these sculptures in the wider art-historical context and show how they can communicate to a multiplicity of interests, which in turn will demonstrate the validity of further investigations.

In fact, recent studies focused on the materialization of the divine and the agency of these objects that represent and embody the divine. According to Caroline Walker Bynum, “the capacity of medieval objects to represent or imitate the divine did not rest in mimetic likeness.”⁹ While agreeing with this statement, I argue that the group of the Descent from the Cross can be considered as an exception of this aspect of medieval art production and objects. These sculptures not only function as symbolic representations of Christ’s Passion, but, because their likeness guaranteed direct access to the divine and the sacred scene, they become the living beings of the Passion of Christ precisely due to their mimeticism. In his *Anthropology of Images*, Hans Belting connects pictures in various media to our mental images and as a consequence to our body. He writes: “The medium is not ‘in the middle’ between image and spectator. [...] Images are exchanged between us and a pictorial medium in the double act of transmission and perception. The medium, the carrier or artificial support, remains ‘out there,’ while the image, a mental construct, is

⁹ Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 282.

negotiated between us and the medium.”¹⁰ As a consequence “the human being is the natural *locus of images*, a living organ for images, as it were. Notwithstanding all the devices that we use today to send and store images, it is within the human being, and only within the human being, that images are received and interpreted in a living sense; that is to say, in a sense that is ever changing and difficult to control no matter how our machines might seek to enforce certain norms.”¹¹ The locus, according to Belting, is the body, and it becomes the “locus in which images are generated and identified.”¹² Furthermore, Belting makes a distinction between a work of art which is “a tangible object with a history, an object that can be classified, dated and exhibited”, while an image “defies such attempts of reification, even to the extent that it often straddles the boundary between physical and mental existence. It might live in a work of art, but the image does not necessarily coincide with the work of art.”¹³ Hans Belting’s theory on images provides an interesting approach that can be deepened and expanded if applied to the group of the Descent from the Cross. In fact, he considers the body as a medium. More precisely, it is a living medium for him, one that is capable of processing images and is also able to add into this process memory and imagination that merge both the physical and the mental aspects of the image. Belting’s ideas are helpful in explaining how Descent from the Cross sculptures in question ultimately functioned. The relationship between the viewer and the image here is not only based on what is seen and what the Descent

¹⁰ Hans Belting and Thomas Dunlap, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 36.

¹¹ *Ibidem.*, 37.

¹² *Ibidem.*, 37.

¹³ *Ibidem.*, 2.

from the Cross stands for, but leads more precisely to an identification with the holy narrative that enacts a substitutive function, an action in which the faithful becomes one with the image. They merge completely into each other.

The issue of the personal connection with the divinity represented by an artwork raises some questions about the problem of “popular piety” and clerical control. Officially the expression “popular piety” means “those diverse cultic expressions of a private or community nature which, in the context of the Christian faith, are inspired predominantly not by the Sacred Liturgy but by forms deriving from a particular nation or people or from their culture.”¹⁴ This is the official version offered by the Vatican but if we consider the different ideas that scholars provided in the study of art history in the matter of “popular piety”, we need to be aware of new insights and approaches that expand and complicate the understanding of this concept.

First of all, recent scholarship is moving from clear distinctions between popular and elite religion towards increasingly considering how the society as a whole aimed to a dimension of appropriation and manipulation of the sacred.¹⁵ In general, literature on late medieval devotion demonstrates that scholars are aware of the dynamic regarding the participation of the faithful in devotional contexts, and

¹⁴ “Congregation for the Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Directory on Popular piety and the Liturgy, Principles and Guidelines”, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20020513_vers-direttorio_en.html. (accessed November 12, 2011).

¹⁵ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: an Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), 129 - 130.

addresses a passage from a visualization of Christ's suffering to an experience that implies an emotional and physical engagement. As a consequence, in order to be fully aware of the dynamic of "popular piety" affecting late medieval devotional practices in Italy we need to consider this shift as it has been presented from various scholarly perspectives. This will allow a deeper comprehension of this new relationship with the sacred established by the faithful and what kind of contribution wooden sculptures had in this more direct engagement with the sacred.¹⁶

Seeing is the most important part of participating in official liturgy,¹⁷ so the development of the devotional practices promoted by the use of these sculptures means a repossession of the sacred, a recuperation of that dimension that implies a participation in the religious event.¹⁸ The naturalism and the heightened emotion that is conveyed in these sculptures has never been studied as much as that

¹⁶ A large amount of literature exists on "popular devotion," see in particular: Derbes, Anne. *Picturing the Passion in late Medieval Italy: Narrative Painting, Franciscan Ideologies, and the Levant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Ellen M. Ross, *The Grief of God Images of the Suffering Jesus in Late Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Gertsman, Elina. *Visualizing Medieval Performance: Perspectives, Histories, Contexts* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008). Swanson, R. N. *Religion and Devotion in Europe, c.1215-c.1515* (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Kate Cooper, and Jeremy Gregory eds. *Elite and Popular Religion: Papers Read at the 2004 Summer Meeting and the 2005 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society* (Woodbridge: Published for the Ecclesiastical History Society by the Boydell Press, 2006). Bornstein, Daniel Ethan. *The Bianchi of 1399: Popular Devotion in Late Medieval Italy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993). Aron I. Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception* (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]: Cambridge University Press 1988). H. W. van Os, *The Art of Devotion in the Late Middle Ages in Europe, 1300-1500* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994). Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: the Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Shinnars, John Raymond. *Medieval Popular Religion, 1000-1500: a Reader* (Peterborough, Ont., Canada: Broadview Press, 1997). Mara, Nerbano. *Il Teatro della Devozione: Confraternite e Spettacolo nell'Umbria Medievale* (Perugia: Morlacchi, 2006). Enrico, Menestò. Ugolino Nicolini, and Francesco Santucci. *Le Fraternite Medievali di Assisi: Linee Storiche e Testi Statutari* (Assisi: Accademia properziana del Subasio, 1989).

¹⁷ Silvio Maggiani, "La Liturgia e la Lauda Drammatica espressione di liminalità", in *Le laudi drammatiche ombre delle origini: atti*, (Viterbo: Agnesotti, 1983), 72.

¹⁸ Luigi Allegri, *Teatro e Spettacolo nel Medioevo* (Bari: Laterza, 1988), 208.

recognized in the paintings made during the same period of mid-Duecento/early Trecento. Instead, art historians credit all of the period's innovations to paintings. A focused investigation of the veristic naturalism, size, and details in relation to the specific functional and ritual context in which wooden sculptures operated will let us understand why their visual features developed as they did and the effect this had on beholders and lay people who interacted so intensely with such sculptures.

In this dissertation, instead of considering paintings and sculptures as separate representations of the Passion of Christ, I want to explore the connections and similarities in the use of both media. In the making of medieval devotion, both greatly contributed to the understanding of the mystery of the faith, and at the same time developed different ways to connect with the divine. What was illustrated and contemplated in paintings turned out to be a real participation with wooden sculptures, a visceral relationship with the sculpture and thus with the humanity of Christ. What mendicant orders taught through paintings, people received and applied with the use and devotion toward wooden sculptures. Often these wooden art forms were made with a realism that was unusual for the period, which demonstrates how the stylistic innovations were strictly correlated with the function and how people thought about them. The fact that realism plays a part in the function requires the piece to be studied with a new approach in which both function and style create a dialogue that speaks for the religious needs of people.

The Scholarship

Critical assessment of late Medieval and Renaissance wooden sculpture has not been as rich or illuminating as the scholarly attention given to painting or even marble sculpture. Frequently, when the medium is considered, wooden sculpture is relegated into the categories of devotional object, folk art or even part of the liturgical furnishing.

Giorgio Vasari, writing in his *Lives of the Artists* (1550, revised and expanded in 1568), provides one early relevant perspective on wooden sculpture, emphasizing the limitations of the medium. Noting the actual popularity of wooden sculpture [‘this sort of figure is much used in the Christian religion, seeing that numberless masters have produced many crucifixes and other objects’], he remarks that examples lack “that flesh-like appearance and softness to wood that can be given to metal and to marble and to the sculptured objects that we see in stucco, wax, or clay.”¹⁹

In the twentieth century, attention began to be given to wooden sculpture, initiating a cursory discourse that never reaches the same level of complexity or articulated interpretations as with sculpture made in other media, such as marble or clay. One of the scholars who started the study and reevaluation of wooden

¹⁹ Giorgio Vasari, Louisa Macle hose, & Brown, G. Baldwin, *Vasari on technique; being the introduction to the three arts of design, architecture, sculpture and painting, prefixed to the Lives of the most excellent painters, sculptors, and architects* (New York: Dover Publications, 1960), 173.

sculpture production is the Italian art historian Géza de Fràncovich.²⁰ While aware of this phenomenon in the whole Europe, he focused his study in Italy and especially in the regions of Lazio, Umbria and Tuscany, in which he believed in the existence of a school of sculpture that elaborated a distinctive style. He also focused on the identification of the iconography of the medieval sculptural production.

Another Italian scholar, Enzo Carli, acknowledged, like Vasari, the diffusion of the practice of creating wooden sculptures and how only in short periods of time it reached a sort of “artistic quality.”²¹ Carli recognized that despite the lack of names linked to much of the surviving wooden sculpture since the Romanesque period, he was aware of the high quality of these works and the fact that scholarship was largely absent on this particular artistic production. Partly influencing the lack of cohesive research on these sculptures is their widespread diffusion, including frequently in small towns, throughout the Italian peninsula.

One of the most relevant studies on the subject, and still a key text for anyone researching this area, is Gesine and Johannes’s article “Mittelalterliche Kruzifixe mit Schwenkbaren Armen. Ein Beitrag zur Verwendung von Bildwerken in der Liturgie.”²² Published in 1969, Gesine and Taubert’s work provides an investigation of the origin and use of Crucifixes with movable arms, paying attention to their form

²⁰ Among his study: Géza de Fràncovich, *Scultura Medievale in Legno* (Tumminelli, Roma: 1943). Also “Un Gruppo di Sculture in Legno Umbro-Marchigiane” in *Bollettino d'arte* del Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione : Notizie dei Musei, delle Gallerie e dei Monumenti d'Italia v. 8 n. 10 (Milano Roma: 1939). “Crocifissi Lignei nel Secolo XII in Italia” in *Bollettino d'Arte*, v 29, (1936).

²¹ Carli Enzo, *Scultura Ligne Senese*, (Milano-Firenze, Electa Editrice, 1951), 9. See also of the same author: Enzo Carli, *La scultura lignea italiana dal XII al XVI secolo* (Milano: Electa, 1961).

²² Gesine and Johannes Taubert, “Mittelalterliche Kruzifixe mit Schwenkbaren Armen. Ein Beitrag zur Verwendung von Bildwerken in der Liturgie”, in *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Vereins für Kunstwissenschaft* 23 (1969), 79-121.

and construction. It also draws upon documents such as pastoral visits in order to recreate the dynamic of the ceremony of the *Depositio Crucis* during the Holy Week.²³ Furthermore, the text represents the first catalog of extant examples of this genre of sculptures, which includes sculptures from different countries in Europe such as Austria, Germany, France, Italy, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Switzerland.

Another study is the *Holzkruzifixe in Florenz und in der Toskana* (1970) by Margrit Lisner. Lisner's work focuses on dates, style, and attributions. While this work provides neither information regarding liturgical use nor an attempt to revise the role of these sculptures in the history of art, her study still represents an important reference for study in this field, in addition to providing a great starting point for an analysis of those sculptures of Christ with movable arms in Italy and, more specifically, Tuscany.

Additionally, Tanya Jung's dissertation, *The Phenomenal Lives of Movable Christ Sculptures* (2006), features an approach not based in cataloguing. Instead, she investigates the cultural, functional, and historical conditions under which these sculptures were made, as well as how these conditions altered over time, particularly within the liturgical and paraliturgical contexts of the Holy Week, Easter, and Ascension Day. *Phenomenal Lives* also discusses how these images would have functioned in the visual culture of the time and the ways in which their usage created a dimension that surpassed the simply representative, affecting

²³ *Ibidem.*, 79-121.

instead, in a very potent way, the devotion of the faithful.²⁴ She acknowledges that these sculptures in particular need to be studied and analyzed, before any other consideration, in terms of their performative function and relationship with the viewer, in a wider context of practice and of reception and response, as opposed to simply categorizing them as sculptures used for devotional purposes during the liturgical year.

Two other interesting contributions on the field of wooden sculptures, among others, and their diffusion in Italy and in Europe are the works by Lorenzelli Jacopo and Pietro and Alberto Veca with *Custode dell'Immagine. Scultura Ligneae Europea XII-XV* (1987) and the catalog of the exhibit *La Deposizione Ligneae in Europa. L'Immagine, Il Culto e la Forma* (2004).²⁵ The first study relates to the diffusion and catalog of wooden sculptures in the form of the Crucified Christ, the group of the Depositions and the Virgin and Child not just in Italy but also throughout Europe. The second is an exhaustive overview of what remains of the production and existence of the group of the Depositions in Europe and their role in the liturgy in the medieval period. It also provides a useful catalog of the extant examples of the Descent from the Cross in Europe, and the thematic contributions analyze numerous issues relating to these objects, such as the geographical

²⁴ Tanya Ann Jung, *The Phenomenal Lives of Movable Christ Sculptures*, (Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Maryland, College Park, 2006), 17-19.

²⁵ Jacopo, Lorenzelli, Pietro, Lorenzelli and Alberto Veca and Galleria Lorenzelli. *Custode Dell'immagine: Scultura Ligneae Europea XII-XV Secolo* (Galleria Lorenzelli, 1987). Giovanna Saporì and Bruno Toscano, *La Deposizione Ligneae in Europa : L'Immagine, il Culto, la Forma* (Catalogo regionale dei beni culturali dell'Umbria. Studi e prospettive, 2004).

distribution, restoration, liturgical use and the religious meaning of these objects within the social context of the period.²⁶

The most recent work on wooden sculptures, and specifically on the wooden Christ with movable arms, is the Polish scholar Kamil Kopania's 2010 publication, *Animated Sculptures of the Crucified Christ in the Religious Culture of the Latin Middle Ages*. At the beginning of Kopania's book, he notes that, particularly for his analysis, the nomenclature *movable arms* is not entirely appropriate because these objects could have, along with movable arms, also movable legs, head, and tongues.²⁷ As a consequence, the use of the term *animated sculptures of the crucified Christ* is more appropriate to designate these objects, despite the possible different use in the liturgical context. He classifies these objects as belonging to one of three groups: sculptures with movable arms, sculptures with an internal mechanism that allows the head or the tongue to be moved, and, finally, sculptures featuring different parts of the body (legs, arms, tongue, and head) which can be moved simultaneously.²⁸

While I embrace Kopania's nomenclature and its move to include these different categories of sculptures, which will be part of my study as well, my

²⁶ Along with the two studies just mentioned there are other important studies on wooden sculptures in the recent years, especially conferences and exhibitions that show a renewed interest on the subject. Francesca Flores D'Arcais, *Il Teatro delle Statue. Gruppi Lignei di Deposizione e Annunciazione tra il XII e XIII Secolo* (Vita e Pensiero, Milano: 2005), Giovan Battista Fidanza (a cura di), *Scultura e Arredo in Legno fra Marche e Umbria, Atti del Primo Convegno, Pergola 24/25 Ottobre 1997*, (Perugia, Quattroemme: 1999), Giovan Battista Fidanza (a cura di), *L'arte del Legno in Italia. Esperienze ed Indagini a Confronto. Atti del Convegno, Pergola 10/12 Maggio 2002* (Perugia, Quattroemme: 2005), Franco Boggero Piero Donati (a cura di), *La Sacra Selva. Scultura Ligneia in Liguria tra il XII e XVI secolo*, (Ginevra-Milano, Skira: 2004), Raffaele Casciaro, *La Scultura Ligneia Lombarda del Rinascimento* (Milano: Skira, 2000), Maria Giannatiempo López, *La Cultura Ligneia nelle Alte Valli del Potenza e dell'Esino* (Milano, Federico Motta Editore: 1999).

²⁷ Kamil Kopania, *Animated Sculptures of the Crucified Christ in the Religious Culture of the Latin Middle Ages* (Warszawa: Wydawn. "Neriton", 2010), 29.

²⁸ *Ibidem.*, 240.

discussion will entail a distinct approach to studying these sculptures. Kamil Kopania was able to catalog a great number of animated sculptures of the crucified Christ all over Europe, or at least where the extant examples remain, expanding the research by Gesine and Johannes Taubert. The countries in which Kopania catalogued these images are: Italy, Spain, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Portugal, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Poland, France, and Slovakia. In countries dominated by Protestant denominations, such as Denmark, Holland, Sweden, Finland, or Great Britain, he was unable to locate sculptures (which most likely would have been destroyed), but he was able to find evidence of their existence through documents.²⁹ His study shows clearly the wide diffusions of these artifacts, and he focuses on the Easter week processions and drama to show how the sculptures were used, particularly for the ceremonies of the *Depositio*, when they would function as stationary devotional objects for the rest of the liturgical year.

While many of these contributions focus largely on cataloging extant examples, other scholarship exploring the subject tends to treat wooden sculptures less as an independent art object than as a liturgical and devotional piece. For example, Karl Young's two-volume *Drama of the Medieval Church* (1933) considers wooden sculptures of Christ, especially those with movable arms, within the dynamic of the liturgical drama of the Church during the Holy Week more as an element of the Roman liturgy and the drama of the Church. A more recent study that follows a similar line of investigation is Claudio Bernardi's *La Drammaturgia della*

²⁹ *Ibidem.*, 239.

Settimana Santa.³⁰ The main focus is the study of the rituals and the theatrical aspect of the celebrations of the Holy Week from the Middle Ages to today.

There is, without a doubt, increased interest in wooden sculpture, and we have greater opportunities to know more about the objects themselves, their diffusion and use in religious contexts. However, wooden sculpture as a topic has not been fully integrated into the overriding art historical discourse that privileges painting over sculpture. Therefore, many questions remain unanswered regarding the dynamic between the two media, their representations of Christ's Passion and their relationships to devotional practice. Even in more general discussions on the history of images, wooden sculpture does not reach a critical independence. Instead, examples are often considered as liturgical objects used to support the study of other aspects of Medieval or Renaissance art, such as frescos, panel painting, liturgy, drama and decoration of churches. In addition to contextualizing wooden sculpture more firmly within the art historical context, I will look to related studies outside of the field, including work on the history of images, materiality, religious visual culture and the anthropology of images.

In the aforementioned *The Power of Images*, David Freedberg's approach is based on the awareness of an instinctive reaction viewers have to images, and, in the process, he establishes a methodology that has had a notable impact on our understanding of art. Moving beyond traditional analyses of shape and color—a break made in his treatment of viewer responses to Titian's *Venus of Urbino* in

³⁰ Claudio Bernardi, *La Drammaturgia della Settimana Santa in Italia* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1991).

chapter one—Freedberg frequently integrates images from popular piety, including wooden crucifixes, that are not often part of art historical discussions.³¹ By contextualizing the specific functions of these objects and their importance to the society that uses them, his book provides a useful starting point for our understanding of those aspects beyond the immediate aesthetic response to the art object. Ultimately, it aids in informing the present study's examination of the role of wooden sculptures within the greater discussion of art history.

Michael Camille, in his *The Gothic Idol*, focuses on the perception of images by the medieval spectators, developing an iconological approach that focuses on the power of the works over their content.³² Although Camille's work only briefly covers wooden sculpture, and not in a context directly beneficial to this study, his approach to function and the reception of images helps situate them within the art historical discourse when applied to the devotional context of wooden sculptures from the end of the twelfth century onwards.

Helpful for better understanding the continuing function and visual practice of religious imagery, especially as they apply to popular piety, is David Morgan's *Visual Piety, A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images*.³³ He explores topics related to history, devotional practices and aesthetics of imagery within their social reality and use, demonstrating how popular religious art can be interpreted through the lens of the functional aesthetic of the beholders. Although he does not directly

³¹ See, for example, chapter 11.

³² Michael Camille, *The Gothic Idol : Ideology and Image-making in Medieval Art*. (Cambridge New Art History and Criticism. Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

³³ David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

address wooden sculptures—and, in fact, his theoretical approach focuses on many modern examples and on their active reception in recent times—Morgan’s work contributes to a deeper understanding of the sacred and its historical contexts through a lens of visual culture, addressing the effects of imagery that are often overlooked in art historical scholarly debates.

Studies attentive to materiality and the anthropology of the image are also important to understanding popular religious sculpture’s late Medieval and Renaissance context. One of the most influential contributions in this vein is Caroline Walker Bynum’s *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe*.³⁴ She carefully highlights the performative and transformative potential of physical objects—considering examples from high and low culture without notable distinction—exploring the invisibility of God and how He reveals himself through material objects such as wooden sculptures, the bread and wine used for the Eucharist and also the body of saints venerated as relics. Specific examples of animated sculptures of the crucified Christ are only briefly addressed. However, highlighting that they were frequently altered with new parts, new colors, clothes or objects to embellish the sculpture in order to adapt them to the new social taste and current religious devotional practices, she demonstrates that attitudes toward the body fluctuate over time and are affected by the changing material qualities of the objects themselves. Such changes have often been considered a negative quality for scholarship evaluating and classifying wooden sculptures from an aesthetic point of

³⁴ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe*. New York : Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books ; Distributed by the MIT Press.

view. Her critical approach to the material life of these objects as it relates to their cultural function, however, can be used as an important starting point to reassess these objects within their historical context.

Also useful for anthropological study of these sculptures is Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency: an Anthropological Theory*.³⁵ Explaining issues of agency, Gell clarifies: "even if God is the ultimate author of his resemblance in the form of magnificent structures and works of art, it remains the case that, at a critical point in the sequence of causes, instruments, and results, human agency is essential. Since, in this world, God's presence is inherent in these works of human agency, he is bound to human purposes, the this-worldly prosperity and other-worldly salvation of his ostensible servants rather than to purposes entirely his own. His agency is enmeshed in ours, by virtue of our capacity to make (and be) his simulacrum."³⁶

In this perspective, wooden sculptures can be seen as a result of "human design" and their features as real "physical channels of access" to divinities, an objectification of a perceived inner subjective self, projections of human consciousness. The anthropological study succeeds in dealing with wooden sculptures in a deeper and broader way, instead of simply a stylistic approach. The interaction between human beings and divinity signifies the importance of these objects and allows the possibility to reevaluate them in the broader context that includes not only devotional practices in general, but also a more personal relationship with the divinity itself.

³⁵ Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: an Anthropological Theory*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998)

³⁶ *Ibidem.*, 114.

A recent study on this subject is Hans Belting's *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, in which the body is considered as a "living medium" or a "locus of images", in which images leave an invisible trace that shapes the memory of it.³⁷ These qualities can become extremely complex if applied to the use of wooden sculptures for devotional purposes since the vision and use of the sculptures not only brings up a potential memory of the scene represented, but also involves an active participation and actualization of the last moments of the life of Christ.

Another area of concern is the relationship of the objects to historical descriptions of their use, especially in regards to vernacular performance. Professor Pietro Scarpellini has begun to define the relationship between figurative art and literary production in the north of Umbria between 1280 and 1350.³⁸ He describes how difficult it is to find a case in which a text corresponds to a painting or vice-versa, as well as the problems tied to establishing whether a certain idea comes first from paintings or from the texts. In his analysis, however, he provides some examples emphasizing that the exchanges were frequent and continuous between painting and *Laude* in art in Umbria between the end of the twelfth and the middle of the fourteenth century.³⁹ While his approach is important to understand this correspondence between painting and texts, he still draws attention to the centrality

³⁷ Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 38.

³⁸ Pietro Scarpellini, "Echi della lauda nella pittura umbra del XII e XIV secolo", in *Le Laudi Drammatiche Umbre delle Origini: Atti del V Convegno di Studio, Viterbo, 22-23-24-25 Maggio 1980*, (Viterbo: Agnesotti, 1983), 166.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 168.

of painting over wooden sculptures in order to have an explanation of the culture of the late Medieval religious society. I want to extend this research to the study of wooden sculptures and consider how close the *lauda* are to these art objects in comparison to painting. In fact, there is an interaction between the text in the *lauda* and the actions (both theatrical and liturgical) in which wooden sculptures are involved that needs to be studied more carefully. The connection between the literary sources and the artworks supports the idea advanced before, in which the style of these wooden sculptures is strictly connected to the religious needs of laymen and faithful. Once we think about the surviving images and the contexts in which they were used, we must also consider all those “countless stories, miracles, legends in which those images are said to move, speak, weep, strike out and eat.”⁴⁰

Corpus of Sculptures

For this study, I want to concentrate on those polychrome sculptures that were used for the celebration of the Holy Week, the group of the Descent from the Cross and the Animated sculptures of the Crucified Christ. I follow their chronological development in the making of devotion during the Late Medieval period in Italy. I chose to focus on these sculptures because their use does not imply solely devotion, but also participation and direct contact. In fact, it is still possible to see them today carried in processions, such as with the example of the wooden

⁴⁰ Freedberg, 291.

deposition of Vicopisano (**fig 1**), or the Christ with movable arms in the rite of *Scavigliazione* (literally referring to the pulling out of the nails, the term describes the enactment of detaching Christ from the Cross and the following veneration of his body by the faithful)⁴¹ in the church of San Rufino in Assisi (**fig 2**). Even if the examples of these sculptures are found and discovered mostly in central Italy, a complete understanding of their function and the artistic and religious value of these objects requires one to go beyond the geographical generalizations and look closely at a variety of individual dynamics, contexts and conditions.⁴² Each case presents its own unique situation, each one of which might differ in terms of the space, time, religious background, and social environment. Moreover, the study can provide a broader picture of the state of medieval wooden sculpture over time. These polychrome sculptures represent an artistic example of style and iconography in a specific place and time.

All of the sculptures examined were carved in wood commonly found in Italy, and questions of how the material itself influences the naturalistic representations are central to the discussion at hand. These issues of matter extend in my discussion to the intersection of materiality and symbolic form.⁴³ The very dynamic properties of these objects permit them to be approached in a variety of ways, and it is necessary to pay attention to each object's individual context and their diverse

⁴¹ Paola Mercurelli Salari, Adolfo Broegg, "Il Rito della Scavigliazione nella Cattedrale di Assisi, (Assisi: Editrice Minerva, 2006), 9.

⁴² Pietro Scarpellini, Giovanna Saporì, "La Deposizione Ligneà: da una Mostra a una Summa", in *Il teatro delle statue* (Milano: V&P, 2005), 30.

⁴³ See Christina Neilson, "Carving Life: the Meaning of Wood in Early Modern European Sculpture" in *The Matter of Art: Materials, Practices, Cultural Logics, c. 1250-1750*, ed Anderson, C., Dunlop, Anne, & Smith, Pamela H. (Manchester University Press, 2015).

patrons, including confraternities, mendicant orders, or bishops responsible of sanctuaries. The role of the artists (a combined effort of sculptors, wood carvers, and painters) was important to each work's style. However, and above all, the style is the result of the needs of the spectators that interact with these sculptures, either in church or when they are activated in the procession or sacred theater. The study of *laude* is pivotal for the comprehension of the role of the movable Christ and how these affected the accessibility of the laymen to the sacred; even though it has not yet been noted whether the *lauda* used during the Holy Friday in Assisi was the development of a new lay (religious) liturgy or simply the translation for laymen of the religious liturgy of the Deposition.⁴⁴ As a matter of fact, the analysis of the *lauda* and its relationship with the liturgy during the celebration of the Holy Friday is strictly linked to the use of wood sculptures, which will greatly contribute to clarify the role of these art objects in late Medieval and Renaissance religious society.

A unique aspect of this genre of statues is that they are still in use during the contemporary practice of the celebration of Holy Friday. In some cases, especially with the older examples such as the Christ with movable arms preserved in the Museum of Cascia, they were substituted with another sculpture, usually a dead Christ that generally covered the same function. In other cases, however, such as the Christ with movable arms in the church of Saint Francis in Leonessa (Lazio), the ritual of *Scavigliazione* is still performed during Holy Week using the same sculpture with which the confraternity started to celebrate this rite. Similarly, the

⁴⁴ Bernardi, 2005, 82.

Scavigliazione and subsequent procession through the streets of Assisi still follows its original arrangement.⁴⁵ The study of the changes and continuities of these rituals that started in the Middle Ages and continue today in some parts of Italy⁴⁶ is a significant segment and potential development of this research. The fact that some rituals are still practiced does not mean that nothing has changed over time. On the contrary, the changes are likely substantial if not radical. With a careful examination, I will be able to evaluate the role of these objects as a historical testimony beginning in the Middle Ages and continuing to today. I will show how the “cultural style” of these sculptures reflects a realism that remains powerful, despite the amount of time that has passed. The wooden sculptures of the representation of Christ, used during the celebration of the Holy Friday, represent a unique artistic creation that embodies different meanings and roles. Notwithstanding the dominant “official” history of art that commonly classifies these sculptures as a mere objects of popular devotion, and despite the fact that the material itself has been highly susceptible to damage over time, these wooden statues had a significant role in the social, artistic, and religious context of late medieval Italy. They are not simply devotional objects. They embody a deeper meaning that touches different avenues of late medieval society. A multidisciplinary approach is pivotal to understanding the complexity of these objects. They stand at the crossroads of different disciplines where art history intersects and combines with history, religious history, anthropology and theater.

⁴⁵ Mercurelli Salari, 21.

⁴⁶ Bernardi, 2005, 83.

The corpus of sculptures I am dealing with specifically relates to examples present in Italy, and they involve the category of the group of the Descent from the Cross and the Animated Sculptures of the Crucified Christ. There are thirty-three examples of the Descent from the Cross surviving in various levels of preservation and number of figures, mostly spread around central Italy.⁴⁷ The catalog of sculptures of the Animated Crucified Christ presents sixty-four extant examples.⁴⁸ Most of these sculptures are in good condition, but frequently some figures from the original Descent groups are missing. The sculpture of Christ is, in some cases, the only figure left, and at times these works were later modified for devotional purposes. For examples in which a mechanism allowing the arms to move was added to a Christ figure from a Descent group, the sculpture is included in the Descent from the Cross catalog since that was its initial function. Moreover, restorations have brought many of these sculptures back to their original splendor, highlighting their continual change and adaptations for different religious and devotional contexts.

The catalog of the Descent group, however, is not fully representative of their historical usage and distribution, which initially suggests a more unusual geographic diffusion of the objects than a revised reading provides us with. That is, most of the

⁴⁷ Giovanna Saponi and Bruno Toscano, "Proposte per un ordinamento di materiali e problemi" in *La Deposizione Ligneo in Europa : L'Immagine, il Culto, la Forma*, ed. Giovanna Saponi and Bruno Toscano (Catalogo regionale dei beni culturali dell'Umbria. Studi e prospettive, 2004), 18-19.

⁴⁸ Kamil Kopania, *Animated Sculptures*, 260-273. However, the list can be expanded. In fact as I was working on this study, I was able to identify new sculptures of the animated Crucified Christ that were never taken into account by the scholarship of the field. For example there is one of these sculpture in the Church of Saint Francis in Assisi and others in the Umbrian cities of Gubbio and Città di Castello.

extant examples are found in scattered around smaller towns instead of in larger cities. It has been suggested that this distribution was influenced by the availability of the wood itself.⁴⁹ However, I will demonstrate that the Descent from the Cross sculptures were actually more often the products of urban centers than smaller towns, and as a consequence it is legitimate to believe that they were more numerous than the existing sample today suggests. Therefore, what remains is just a small selection of the original and more spread out production.

There are documents, for example, that attest to the frequent presence of these sculptures in bigger cities even though they are missing today. Vasari's *Lives*, for one, attests to this history. He describes an example of the Descent from the Cross that used to be at the Pieve of Santa Maria in Arezzo. Even though there is no longer a trace of this wooden group of the Descent, Vasari writes of four figures that were part of a Descent from the Cross in this area.⁵⁰ I offer an alternative explanation of the lack of these groups from urban centers today: the sculptures in bigger cities and major centers were more susceptible to changing devotional climates, and the effects of Counter Reformation being particularly harmful to their survivability. They were removed from churches or destroyed because they did not align with the new orders promoted by the Church,⁵¹ and this tendency seems to have been more forcefully undertaken in the bigger cities than in the small towns of the Italian peninsula.

⁴⁹ Carli Enzo, *Mostra della antica scultura lignea senese: Palazzo Pubblico di Siena* (Firenze: Electa, 1949) 7.

⁵⁰ Giorgio Vasari, "Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori ed architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568" (Milano, 1962), 291.

⁵¹ Saporì, *Toscana*, 27.

As for the animated sculptures of the crucified Christ, scholarship so far has been able to catalog sixty-four examples throughout Italy.⁵² I am aware that this typology of sculpture was spread out in different countries in Europe, but remain here focused on the central Italian corpus.⁵³ Even in this case, the extant examples of animated sculptures of the crucified Christ represent a smaller number than the potential original number. There are animated sculptures of the crucified Christ known from historical sources such as inventory of Churches, confraternities and sacristies.⁵⁴ While pursuing this research I was able to catalog more examples of animated sculptures of the Crucified Christ, additions of which to the corpus will be left to further projects.

⁵² Kopania, *Animated Sculptures*, 273.

⁵³ Kopania, *Animated Sculptures*, see the catalog of Medieval Animated Sculptures of Christ, pag 246-287.

⁵⁴ Information of the *Statuti* of Confraternities and historical sources can be found in: Angela Maria Terruggia, "In Quale Momento i Disciplinati hanno dato inizio al loro teatro?" in *Il movimento dei disciplinati nel settimo centenario dal suo inizio (Perugia, 1260); convegno internazionale: Perugia, 25-28 settembre 1960*. [Spoleto]: (Arti grafiche Panetto & Petrelli, 1962), 434-459. Elvio Lunghi, *La Passione degli Umbri: Crocifissi in Legno in Valle Umbra tra Medioevo e Rinascimento*. Foligno: Edizioni Orfini Numeister, 2000. Elvio Lunghi, "La Scultura Lignea in Umbria nel XIII Secolo." In *L'Umbria nel XIII Secolo*. Edited by Enrico Menestò. 299-331. Spoleto: Fondazione Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo 2010. Claudio Bernardi, "Devozioni e Rappresentazioni di Cristo nel tardo Medioevo," in *Civiltà Bresciana*, vol VIII, no. 2, 1999, 6-17. Claudio Bernardi, *La drammaturgia della Settimana Santa in Italia*. Milano: Vita e pensiero, 1991. Claudio Bernardi "La Deposizione di Cristo nei Teatri della Pietà" in *Sacre Passioni: Scultura Lignea a Pisa dal XII al XV secolo*. edited by Mariagiulia Burrese. 15-18. Milano: F. Motta, 2000.

Structure of the Dissertation

In the following chapters I construct a reevaluation of the study and the role of wooden medieval sculptures, focusing the groups of the Descent from the Cross and the animated sculptures of Christ and my intention is to provide a different reading of these sculptures in affecting the devotion and the art production of the period.

Chapter 1 offers an overview of the corpus of sculptures, the development and diffusion of the iconography of the Descent from the cross, and the origin of the sculptural groups and the connection with the Benedictine order.

In Chapter 2, I reconsider the role of the sculpture and the idea of approaching it beyond the consideration of a simple devotional object. I argue that the role of the sculpted version of the Descent from the Cross, despite its iconographical similarities with the painted version, had a different impact in affecting devotion during the late medieval period. In fact, along with the use of the *laude* (vernacular sacred song), they promoted an identification with the scene that led to a substitution of the characters of this group, the Virgin Mary, John the Evangelist, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus by the faithful. This action of substitution created not only a reenactment of the scene during the celebrations of the Holy Friday, but rather a real participation that would transcend time and space.

Chapter 3 focuses on how the sculpted representation of the crucified Christ would come to be perceived as the real body of Christ and how laity were able to

attain a privileged access to the sacred through the use and interaction with these sculptures.

In Chapter 4 I will explore the role of the use of wooden sculptures for devotional purposes and argue that it influenced the pictorial medium during the same period. This discussion promotes a scholarly revision and redefinition of the role and contribution of these objects in the production of medieval art.

Chapter 5 discusses the development asserted in the previous chapters. I examine how the sculptures of the crucified Christ were treated and perceived as the real body of Christ by the faithful. When we see a crucifix in the pictorial production during the Middle Ages, I argue that what is represented is not as much a real body, but rather the wooden representation of the body of Christ that was seen and treated as the real body of Christ. I want to demonstrate how the crucified Christ depicted during the medieval period would connect the viewer to the sculptural representation of the crucified Christ, simulacrum of the real presence and body of Christ.

In the final chapter 6, I discuss how the wooden group of the Descent from the Cross and the animated sculptures of the Crucified Christ eluded the problem of idolatry because of specific features and the relationship established with the faithful. Despite the presence of cases in which these sculptures had a cavity to contain a relic (as a consequence they would work as “container” for the relic), from the initial production of these objects they were considered as real participants and they were not meant to hold relics. This is especially true of the group of the Descent

from the Cross. As a consequence, they were treated as real people and faithful were able to identify themselves with them and “who” they adore was not the sculpture but rather the “person” that these sculptures would become. At the same time these sculptures were looked at with skepticism by the ecclesiastical institution because of the fear and the risk of idolatry by the faithful. This very interesting relationship was the result of a combination of a devotional dynamic between the popular piety and these sculptures because of their capability to embody and satisfy the need of the faithful in the connection with the “body” of Christ.

The Church established officially the “presence of Christ” in the Eucharist and the devotees experienced a sense of this presence also in different materials and objects such as for example icons and sculptures. At the same time I argue that the Church seems to tolerate the peculiar relationship that the faithful had with these sculptures, even if it could have been defined as “idolatrous,” because of the particular, effective and powerful capability of these objects to personify and represent the incarnation and bodily presence of Christ that allowed a deeper and physical connection between the faithful and the object.

Chapter 1

Diffusion and Iconography of the group of the Descent from the Cross

The diffusion of the theme of the Descent from the Cross and its iconography has been already subject of study by art historians, at the same time both the wooden group of the Descent from the Cross and the following animated wooden sculptures of the crucified Christ have not been considered as much as their pictorial counterpart. This chapter focuses on the diffusion of the theme of the Descent from the Cross, its iconography, and some considerations of its origin, relationship, and possible link with the Benedictine order.

Both the Descent from the Cross and the animated wooden sculptures of the crucified Christ were utilized during Holy Friday celebrations. They served the double function of representing Christ as both crucified and dead, mainly due to a mechanism that allowed movement in a sculpture's arms. Current study of these figures is strictly limited to extant examples. Wooden sculptures representing the Descent from the Cross are preserved in four European countries: Belgium, France, Italy, and Spain. Italy, particularly central Italy, has preserved the majority of these wooden sculptures, which are usually found in small towns and are considered relatively less important than those found in larger cities in the same area. The same can be said for animated sculptures of the crucified Christ: they are spread

throughout Europe, but the majority of the extant examples are preserved in Italy. This chapter will show the geographical distribution of extant wooden sculptures in Italy and their connections with previous iconographical examples of the Descent from the Cross.

The geographical distribution of the groups of the Descent from the Cross can be considered unusual, in a way. The extant examples survived in small towns and villages, mostly in the center of Italy rather than in big cities. This could have been the result of a different relationship with the wooden group in general, but above all an exclusion or independence from the changes that affected larger cities. Another reason is that the existence of these groups centers around the nature of the wood itself, which was easier to find in Italy, like in the rest of Europe, than marble.

Wood was a desirable material with which to create these sculptures because it allowed a more naturalistic representation of the religious subjects.¹ However, this interpretation does not correlate with the historical diffusion of these objects. Though the majority of them no longer exist, Descent from the Cross sculptures were produced both in small and large cities, thus it is probable that the extant collection is only a minimal part of the original and more spread out production. Historical documentation illuminates the diffusion of these sculptures in

¹ Enzo Carli, *Mostra della Antica Scultura Ligneas Senese: Palazzo Pubblico di Siena* (Firenze: Electa, 1949), 7.

larger cities, though they no longer exist. One such documentation is in Vasari's *Lives*, in which he describes an example of the Descent from the Cross in the Pieve of Santa Maria in Arezzo.² The disappearance of this and other wooden groups of the Descent, particularly in major centers and large cities, can be explained by two events: a change in the devotional climate, and the actions of the Counter Reformation. These sculptures were removed from churches or destroyed because they did not match the practicality of the new order promoted by the Church;³ this action was more forcefully undertaken in the larger cities than in the small towns of the Italian peninsula.

Unfortunately, we have only a general account of the diffusion of these wooden groups; based on the knowledge we have of their origins we can only loosely link them to dioceses or Benedictine centers in the Italian territory.⁴ Considering the medium itself, its cultural use, and its easy transportability, scholars were able to distinguish and establish the original locations of only a few of these sculptures, while other locations can only be assumed. Today, there are thirty-three wooden groups of Descent from the Cross; they are divided between cities in which there was a diocese, such Gubbio, San Sepolcro, Tivoli, or Volterra, in small cities

² Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de' più Eccellenti Pittori Scultori ed Architettori nelle Redazioni del 1550 e 1568* (Milano, 1962), 291.

³ Saponi, Giovanna, and Bruno Toscano, *La Deposizione Lignea in Europa: l'Immagine, il Culto, la Forma*, (Perugia, Electa: 2004), 27.

⁴ *Ibidem*, 24.

such as Barga, Pescia, Vicopisano, and Cascia, or in very small communities such as Roccatamburo.⁵ The confirmed and assumed locations of these groups include cathedrals, pieves, local parish churches, Benedictine and Augustinian churches, and oratories belonging to confraternities. These diverse locations show the variety of contexts in which these sculptures were utilized and the capillary diffusion of them in the center of Italy.

The oldest extant example of a Deposed Christ that would have been part of a group of the Descent from the Cross is the *Curva Crux* from Louvain, dating back to the middle of the eleventh century (**Fig 1**). The Deposed Christ from Pisa (**Fig 2**) is the only one in Italy that can be dated back to around the twelfth century, and it is also the only one in Italy that reflects a stylistic influence from Northern Europe.⁶ The extant examples, however, are far fewer than what has been lost throughout the centuries. According to recent studies, it seems almost impossible to fully understand the events linked to the development of these artworks. Yet it is still important to consider surviving examples and to investigate how wooden groups of the Descent from the Cross affected devotion in late Medieval and Early Renaissance art. Scholarship often concentrates too heavily on the stylistic features of these art objects and their probable iconographic origins without attempting to understand

⁵ Ibidem., 19.

⁶ Giovanna Saporì e Bruno Toscano, "Proposte per un Ordinamento di Materiali e Problemi" in *La Deposizione Ligneà in Europa, L'Immagine il Culto, la Forma* ed Giovanna Saporì e Bruno Toscano. (Perugia: Electa Editori Umbri Associati, 2004), 62.

and contextualize their role in a devotional context, in a way that can emancipate them from the status of devotional objects. Though there is a lack of primary sources that would facilitate a different analysis and approach to studying the Descent from the Cross, scholars have developed a plausible connection between these sculptures and the *Sacre Rappresentazioni*, theatrical sacred representations that developed in Italy during the thirteenth century.

It is important to note that the Descent from the Cross is a theme that has been represented widely in art, even if the topical literature does not provide the accuracy, specificity, and variety of detail that we find in other types of art production. In fact, there are only a few details about the actual scene recorded by the four Evangelists in their Gospels. Luke, Mark, and Matthew provide an essential account of the moment of the Descent from the Cross; they mention Joseph of Arimathea as the disciple who asked Pilate for the body of Christ and helped for his burial. John, however, is the only one who also mentions Nicodemus; the latter is often artistically represented to be at the scene of the Descent from the Cross⁷. Some

⁷ "The Gospel according to John" *The Burial of Christ*,
<http://www.utoronto.ca/religion/synopsis/meta-4g.htm>

Even if John is the only one who mentioned Nicodemus along with Joseph of Arimathea, the way he described the burial is very simple and similar to the other Evangelists. "After this Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him leave. So he came and took away his body. 19.39 Nicodemus also, who had at first come to him by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds' weight. 19.40 They took the body of Jesus, and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews". 19.41

apocryphal sources like the *Acta Pilati*⁸ and the *Gospels of Nicodemus* provide other information about the Descent from the Cross, but only in the Gospel of Nicodemus and the Gospel of John is Nicodemus present and part of the event. Only in this former text is the Virgin Mary present for the burial of her Son. Despite the presence of both Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, alongside the Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist, Joseph of Arimathea has an honorable role in the Passion because he embraces the body of Christ. In later accounts such as the thirteenth-century writing of Saint Bonaventura, the importance of Joseph of Arimathea is recognized.⁹ The presence of these different characters is important not only because of their contribution to historical accuracy, but also because they provide the faithful with the chance to access the body of Christ during the devotional developments in the thirteenth century.

⁸ George Sluter ed, *The Acta Pilati, Important Testimony of Pontius Pilate Recently Discovered, Being His Official report to the Emperor Tiberius Concerning the Crucifixion of Christ* (Shelbyville Ind: M.B. Robins, Publisher and Printer, 1879), 67 -68.

⁹ Isa Ragusa and Rosalie B. Green, *Meditations on the Life of Christ: An Illustrated Manuscript of the Fourteenth Century* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1961), 341 – 342. “Two ladders are placed on the opposite sides of the cross. Joseph ascends the ladder placed on the right side and tries to extract the nail from His hand. But this is difficult, because the long, heavy nail is fixed firmly into the wood; and it does not seem possible to do it without great pressure on the hand of the Lord. Yet it is not brutal, because he acts faithfully; and the Lord accepts everything. The nail pulled out, John makes a sign to Joseph to extend the said nail to him, in order that the Virgin may not notice it. Afterwards Nicodemus extracts the other nail from the left hand and similarly gives it to John. Nicodemus descends and comes to the nails in the feet. Joseph supported the body of the Lord; happy indeed is this Joseph, who has deserved thus to embrace the body of the Lord! Then the Lady respectfully receives the hanging right hand and places it against her cheek, gas upon it and kisses it with the heavy tears and sorrowful sighs”.

Before it was represented in art, the Descent from the Cross was most likely considered as a sequence of moments that carefully described the action of the complete *Deposition*. This term, from the Latin *depositio*, usually implies the act of burial as well. In relation to Christ, however, this term signifies the moments in which Christ was taken down from the Cross, afterwards known as the Descent from the Cross. The iconography of the Descent from the Cross has been considered according to its composition and its progression. The image progresses from the image of Christ with both arms attached to the cross while Joseph of Arimathea is embracing his body and Nicodemus, the Virgin Mary, and John the Evangelist stand aside **(Fig 3)**, to the version in which Joseph is passing the body of Christ to the Virgin Mary for mourning before the burial. **(Fig 4)**¹⁰

The oldest surviving example of the representation of the Descent from the Cross is in a illuminated manuscript dated to the second half of the ninth century.¹¹

¹⁰ Elizabeth C. Parker, *The Descent from the Cross: Its Relation to the Extra-Liturgical "Depositio" Drama*. (New York: Garland Pub: 1978), 2, provides a detailed account of this iconographical progressive change in the representation of the Descent from the Cross. She argues how a more traditional version developed in the East was followed by a more theatrical and elaborate version in which the body was freed from the nails. Despite it is impossible to link every western example with a correspondent eastern source, this pattern has been generally accepted and it has been the starting point in order to study the subject.

¹¹ Émile Mâle, *Religious Art in France. The Twelfth Century. A Study of the Origins of Medieval Iconography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1978), 106. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Greek, Codex of Angers. Bibl. Municipale. Cod.24. Fol.8 Conv. Soppr. 160, f. 213v. p. The literature on the iconography of the Descent from the Cross is extensive. See also: . Parker, *The Descent from the Cross*, 1978. Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian art*. (1st American ed) Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1971. Schällicke, Bernd. "Die Ikonographie der monumentalen Kreuzabnahmegruppen des Mittelalters in Spanien" Ph.D Diss. FU Berlin, 1975.

(Fig 5). All five characters appear in this miniature: the Virgin Mary holds the hand of her son, Joseph of Arimathea sustains the body of Christ, and Nicodemus detaches Christ's other hand from the cross. John the Evangelist is represented as looking up and contemplating the scene. The rendering of these five religious figures in the first visual depiction of this event set a standard for following depictions of the Descent from the Cross.

Another model that can be considered among the earliest representations of the iconography of the Descent from the Cross in Western Europe comes from an eleventh-century ivory plate originating most probably in Metz, in Lorraine **(Fig 6)**. The image's style reflects an influence by Byzantine models and depicts a complete illustration of the Passion of Christ.¹² This image establishes the Byzantine origin of the iconography and its subsequent diffusion throughout the West in the form of miniatures,¹³ as well as a general correspondence of iconographical variants between the East and the West.

The Descent from the Cross has been represented in a variety of contexts using different media. There are examples in painted wood panels **(Fig 7)**, sculpted wood **(Fig 8 - Tivoli)**, fresco **(Fig 9)**, marble **(Fig 10)**, illuminated manuscript **(Fig**

Giovanna Saporì e Bruno Toscano, *La Deposizione Ligneà in Europa, L'Immagine il Culto, la Forma*, Perugia: Electa Editori Umbri Associati, 2004.

¹² Jean-René Gaborit, "Le Rappresentazioni Scolpite della Deposizione in Francia dal X al XIV secolo" in *La Deposizione Ligneà in Europa, L'Immagine il Culto, la Forma* ed Giovanna Saporì e Bruno Toscano. (Perugia: Electa Editori Umbri Associati, 2004), 449.

¹³ Mâle, *Religious Art*, 108.

11) and also stained glass (**Fig 12**). As a moment that follows the Crucifixion, the Descent from the Cross is frequently represented in one of the scenes of the life of Christ in the Medieval historiated painted crosses and depicts the varying levels of physical and psychological involvement of the scene's participants. In some cases the scene was inserted into the narrative of the major Passion cycle. Scholars have distinguished between representations of the Descent that are part of a narration of the Passion of Christ, and those in which the Descent has a particular relevance inside the church in reference to its singular position or the monumental character of the artwork itself.¹⁴

Hans Belting, while aware that these groups have not been studied properly according to their liturgical use, nonetheless divided the iconography of the Descent from the Cross into two categories. The first is the *ritual deposition*, which utilizes a symbolic representation and is static in its organization. An example of this kind of Descent from the Cross is the group in Tivoli (**Fig 13**). This category includes the symbolic transposition of the action itself during this moment of the Descent from the Cross. Its organization includes Christ, who is nailed on the cross by his feet and his arms open in a gesture of embrace, while the surrounding figures are arranged symmetrically. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea are attempting to release the body of Christ while the Virgin and John wait to receive his body. The strict

¹⁴ Gaborit, *Le Rappresentazioni Scolpite della Deposizione*, 452.

symmetrical arrangement and conventional gestures convert the historical action into a ritual act that merits symbolic interpretation.¹⁵

The second category, which involves a slight deviation from the *ritual deposition* and observed schema, is the Descent from the Cross in the cathedral in Volterra (**Fig 14**). This Descent is an example of *scenic deposition*, which provides an attempt of the ensemble in motion to follow what is represented in painting or a mosaic of the same subject (**Fig 15 - Descent from Udine - fix powerpoint**). In the Descent from the Cross in Volterra, Joseph of Arimathea is very close to Christ, holding his body while Nicodemus pulls the nails out of his feet; the Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist hold the hands of Christ in the act of receiving his body.¹⁶ These two categories represent the variation of the wooden sculpted version of the Descent from the Cross.

Before Hans Belting's work, Camillo Pierattini provided a sort of clarification and distinction to the iconography of the Descent from the Cross. He considered the *schiodatura* or *schiaivamento*, the action of pulling the nails from the cross in which Christ is supported by a cord around his body, as similar to the groups in Volterra or Vicopisano. The first category of these wooden groups is more properly considered as Descents from the Cross, in which Christ is represented frontally with stretched

¹⁵ Gèza De Francovich, "A Romanesque School of Wood Carvers in Central Italy" in *Art Bulletin* Vol 19, n. 11 (March 1937), 31. Hans Belting, *L'Arte e il Suo Pubblico: Funzione e Forme delle Antiche Immagini della Passione* (Nuova Alfa Editoriale: Bologna: 1986),169.

¹⁶ Belting, *L'Arte e il Suo Pubblico*, 170.

arms ready to embrace the faithful. Examples of this kind of iconography include the groups in Tivoli, Norcia, and Pescia (even though the group of Pescia presents a cord that supports Christ).¹⁷ Beyond this slight variation, the iconography does not change during the time these sculpted groups were produced. Both cases, however, despite the difference in the iconography, symbolize the gestures that are performed in the the *Sacre Rappresentazioni*.

Scholarship on the wooden group of the Descent from the Cross focuses primarily on its iconography, style, and diffusion throughout Europe, particularly in Italy, Spain, and France. However, little has been said about the uses and effects of these sculptures and their development. The reason is primarily due to a lack of specific information and documentation that would allow a clear and supported understanding of the liturgical use of these wooden groups, either by the church or by the laity. Going beyond analyzing iconography and style, my aim is to reevaluate the function of the wooden groups of the Descent from the Cross, as well as animated sculptures of the crucified Christ, and thus illuminate the important role they held in devotional life in the late Medieval period and their affect on contemporary pictorial production.

¹⁷ Camillo Pierattini, "Una Lettura del Gruppo Ligneo della Deposizione di Tivoli" in *Atti e Memorie della Società Tiburtina di Storia e Arte*, Vol 56, (1983), 141-208.

One aspect that will be considered in the reevaluation of the Descent is the extra liturgical Deposition drama. Since its beginning in the tenth century, the Deposition rite was practiced throughout Europe.¹⁸ It was never included in the Roman liturgy, even though artworks and texts attest that it was performed regularly throughout Europe. This ritual was frequently organized at a local level, and in some cases laypeople had the chance to participate directly in these ceremonies through the form of processions.¹⁹ The earliest preserved record of a Deposition rite comes from the *Monastic Agreement of Monks and Nuns of England*, in which instructions were provided regarding the Adoration of the Cross and the Deposition.²⁰

During these Deposition rituals, the clergy occasionally used a life-size wooden sculpture of Christ instead of a cross or the host.²¹ The use of the host was more common in European countries north of the Alps such as Germany. Spanish

¹⁸ Amy Knight Powell, *Depositions: Scenes from the late Medieval Church and the Modern Museum* (Zone Books: New York, 2012), 45.

¹⁹ *Ibidem.*, 45.

²⁰ "Now since on that day we solemnize the burial of the Body of our Saviour, if anyone should care or think fit to follow in a becoming manner certain religious men in a practice worthy to be imitated for the strengthening of the faith of unlearned common persons and neophytes, we have decreed this only: on that part of the altar where there is space for it there shall be a representation as it were of a sepulcher, hung about with a curtain, in which the holy Cross, when it has been venerated, shall be placed in the following manner: the deacons who carried the Cross before shall come forward and, having wrapped the Cross in a napkin there where it was venerated, they shall bear it thence, singing the antiphons *In peace, in the selfsame; He shall dwell;* and *My flesh shall rest in hope*, to the place of the sepulcher. When they have laid the Cross therein, in imitation as it were of the burial of the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, they shall sing the antiphon *After the Lord was buried*" in *The Monastic Agreement of the Monks and Nuns of the English Nation*, trans. Thomas Symons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 44-45. As quoted in Powell, *Depositions: Scenes* 47.

²¹ Powell, *Depositions Scenes*, 47.

and Italian rituals, however, more frequently used wooden life-size groups of sculptures representing the Descent from the Cross for these kinds of celebrations. Italy's inclination toward the use of sculptures considerably affected the devotional relationship between the object and its viewer, promoting a direct identification between the viewer and the sculptures in the scene.

In this research I would like to stretch our understanding of the wooden groups of the Descent from the Cross and the animated sculptures of the crucified Christ, particularly the way they created and affected devotional life in late Medieval and Early Renaissance Italy.

Theatricalized liturgical ceremonies were first incorporated into the ceremonies of the *Holy Week*, particularly *Pascal Triduum*, around the seventh century, while the *Depositio* and *Elevatio Crucis* developed around the tenth century. In Karl Young's study *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, he argues that there might have been connections between the official liturgy and the extra-liturgical ceremonials.²² Though the clergy controlled these ceremonies, which went beyond theatrical reenactments, the faithful were invited to exit the church during the most important moments of these celebrations. This choice emphasized the distance

²² Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), 115. "Resemblance between the liturgical reservation from the Holy Thursday to Good Friday and the extra-liturgical dramatic ceremonials are not difficult to discern. The chest, or tabernacle, in which the reserved host is placed has a parallel in the sepulchrum in some version of the dramatic ceremonials."

between the clergy and the faithful, and enhanced the prestige of the clergy through their role in this crucial event.

It was common throughout Europe to exclude the faithful from the crucial moments of the celebration of the *Depositio Crucis*. This was in order to heighten its accuracy in replicating the original scene since very few people participated the burial of Christ. In addition, the absence of the faithful at the moment of the burial contributed further to the celebration's status as a ceremony rather than just a play.²³ At the beginning of the development of these rituals, a cross or a host was typically used as the embodiment of Christ for his burial. Later in time, a wooden sculpture of the dead Christ was occasionally used and placed in a symbolic representation of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem (**Fig 16**). This use of an animated sculpture of the Crucified Christ did not affect the ritual itself but greatly heightened

²³ Kamil Kopania, *Animated Sculptures of the Crucified Christ in the Religious Culture of the Latin Middle Ages*, (Warszawa: Wydawn: Neriton, 2010), 133. Kamil Kopania in his study quoted the contributions of Father Zenon Modzelewski, *Estetyka średniowiecznego dramatu liturgicznego. Cykl Wielkiego Tygodnia w Polsce*, 1964 and Julian Lewański, *Średniowieczne gatunki dramatyczno-teatralne*, 1966. Especially Julian Lewański underlines the different features of such ceremonies. He noted how the faithful both initiate and at the same time are absent from the presentation of the *Depositio Crucis*. He also distinguishes three categories of participation: the laypeople who watch the scene and are aware of what is happening, and somehow participate in the ritual just through their presence. The second type of participation involves the clergy, who, knowing Latin can fully understand the ceremony in its different meaning. The third category includes the part of the clergy that actually performs the ceremony, such as the bishop, the canon college, the prelates, and the singers. They represent the highest rank in the hierarchy of the clergy and the most educated as well.

the realism of the ceremony. This new form of realism is essential for analyzing the power of these sculptures.

The Descent from the Cross and the relationship with the Benedictine order

The fact that several extant examples of these sculptures have been found in a Benedictine environment²⁴ testifies to the possible connection between these wooden groups and the Benedictine order. While the connection between the Descent from the Cross and the Benedictine religious order might become evident when considering the ritual of the *Depositio Crucis* in the Benedictine order around Europe, a Benedictine origin of these group sculptures is not established. Scholars have posited an association between the use of the wood and the Benedictines due to the fact that wood avoided any kind of splendor or lavishness when used in art and was thus a choice material for the order, especially the Cistercians.²⁵ The Rule of Saint Benedict itself considered craft activities to be an important and appropriate

²⁴ Giovanna Saponi e Bruno Toscano, "Proposte per un Ordinamento di Materiali e Problemi" in *La Deposizione Lignea in Europa, L'Immagine il Culto, la Forma* ed Giovanna Saponi e Bruno Toscano. (Perugia: Electa Editori Umbri Associati, 2004), 19. In their article there is a census and a map of the distribution of these wooden Descents from the cross in Italy.

²⁵ Pietro Scarpellini, "La Deposizione dalla Croce Lignea nell'Italia Centrale: Osservazioni e Ipotesi" in *La Deposizione Lignea in Europa, L'Immagine il Culto, la Forma* ed Giovanna Saponi e Bruno Toscano. (Perugia: Electa Editori Umbri Associati, 2004), 345.

method of work at the cloister,²⁶ which suggests a similarity to the process of building the sculptures. This emphasis on the material of wood is important because it might link, at least conceptually, the production of these wooden sculptures to the Benedictine order.

The link between the Cistercians and the development—and more specifically the iconography—of the Descent from the Cross comes from the Life of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux. While Saint Bernard was praying in adoration in front of the cross, “Rush to the embrace! He while nailed to the wood of the cross, offers himself with stretched arms to the loving for a mutual embrace,”²⁷ he was embraced by Christ, reinforcing the idea of a corporal connection with Christ and his suffering **(Fig 17)**. This miraculous moment reflected “Bernard’s immense contribution in a developing theology centered on Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross.”²⁸ In one of his *Sententiae*, Saint Bernard talks of the “cross of Christ—not that wooden cross on which he hung, but the cross of charity on which, then as now, he was outstretched as if to embrace us with his extended, loving arms.”²⁹ Though this sentence is

²⁶ L. Herbert Kessler, “On the State of Medieval Art History” *The Art Bulletin* no. 2 (1988), 180.

²⁷ Hans Belting, “L’Arte e il suo Pubblico” (Bologna: Nuova Alfa Editoriale, 1986), 87. “Cristo separatis brachiis a cornibus crucis, videbatur eundem Dei famulum amplectantem ac astringere sibi”

²⁸ James France, *Medieval Images of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2006), 180.

²⁹ “Quattuor sint cruces diversa meritorum stipendia expectantes. Prima est crux Christi, non lingua illa in qua perpebdit, sed crux caritatis in qua et tunc et nunc extensus quasi ad emplexandos nos amoris brachiis expansis”, Translation is from Bernard, and Maureen M. O'Brien, “*Bernard of Clairvaux: the Parables & the Sentences*” (Kalamazoo, Mich: Cistercian Publications: 2000), 181.

reported to be from one of Saint Bernard's sermons, we do not know the context or the specific reference, thus we are not able to link this sermon specifically with the Groups of the Descent from the Cross, since it could have also been simply a crucifix interpreted through the spiritual involvement and intimate experience of the Saint.

Saint Bernard's embrace drew attention to Christ's participation in our humanity. In his other works, Saint Bernard reminds his readers of the passion of Christ and the great suffering he endured for all of humanity.³⁰ The themes present in Saint Bernard's vision are also provided by the twelfth-century pseudobernardine hymn of lamentation, *Planctus ante nescia*, indicating that the idea and the gesture of the embrace was connected not only to the life, experience, and vision of Saint Bernard, but was also something that belonged to the public domain of devotional practice. The emphasis on touch in Saint Bernard's embrace can be seen in the production of wooden sculptures. In fact, the Saint mentions a cross in his vision, not a painting; thus, there is a physical body present along with a gesture of embrace represented by the sculpture of Christ on the cross and Saint Bernard himself.

However, determining the relationship between the Benedictine order—specifically the Cistercians—and the Descent from the Cross is more complicated than simply highlighting the fact that some of the extant examples of these wooden

³⁰ France, *Medieval Images*, 183.

groups are in Benedictine environments as well as Saint Bernard's *amplexus*. For now we can only assume the connection between the Descent from the Cross and the Benedictines order, according to extant examples and the importance of the *Imitatio Christi* in the liturgy of the different branches of the Benedictine order, such as the Cistercians or the Camaldolese.³¹ In fact, while there is the suggestion that Saint Bernard's vision could have affected the promotion of the wooden Descent from the Cross in Bourgogne, no document has been found that would testify to the presence of one of these wooden Descents in any of the Cistercian abbeys. Alternatively, Saint Bernard's prayer could have been stimulated by one of these groups of sculptures while he was traveling to promote the second Crusade.³²

In fact, Elvio Lunghi has suggested a reverse explanation: that Saint Bernard of Clairvaux's vision in front of a crucifix could have been stimulated by contemplation in front of one of the groups of the Descent, which he might have

³¹ Peter-Damian Belisle "Overview of Camaldolese History and Spirituality" in *The Privilege of Love. Camaldolese Benedictine Spirituality*" ed by Peter-Damian Belisle, O.S.B. Cam. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 15

³² Elvio Lunghi, "Considerazioni ed Ipotesi sulle Sculture Lignee nelle Chiese dell'Umbria tra il XII e il XIII Secolo", In *Umbria e Marche in Età Romanica: Arti e Tecniche a Confronto tra XI e XIII Secolo*. Edited by Enrica Neri Lusanna, (Todi: Ediart, 2014), 4. Professor Lunghi supports the idea that Saint Bernard was stimulated in his prayers to have the vision of Christ and his embrace after seeing one of these Descents from the Cross in France while going around and supporting the Second Crusade with his sermons. This idea is also validated considering that mystical visions occurred during the Middle Ages in front of sculptural representation of Christ.

encountered in one of the churches he visited while traveling to support the Second Crusade in 1147.³³

This hypothesis is supported by the fact that there is a wooden Christ that was originally a part of a group of the Descent from the Cross (**Fig 18**) in Pisa. This sculpture has a direct connection to the art production in France (Burgundy), and a document exists that implies that the sculpture was acquired during the Crusades, most likely the second (1147-49) or third (1188-92) crusade.³⁴ Thus, either the existence or chronology of the real group of the Descent from the Cross corresponds with the possibility that Saint Bernard could have seen and been inspired by one of these groups for his mystical vision. This is plausible especially because it is not the first example of an artwork affecting and stimulating a mystical vision.³⁵ The physical gesture as well, which shows Christ in the act of embracing the faithful, corresponds with the corporeal relationship of the mystical encounter between Saint Bernard and Christ. Specifically for this case, the iconography of Christ as a part of the group of the Descent that originally comes from the French region of

³³ Elvio Lunghi "Considerazioni ed Ipotesi sulle Sculture Lignee nelle Chiese dell'Umbria tra il XII e il XIII secolo" in *Umbria e Marche in età romanica: arti e tecniche a confronto tra XI e XIII secolo*. Convegno "Testi e contesti, arti e tecniche a confronto in Umbria e nelle Marche in età romanica", and Enrica Neri Lusanna. (Ediart, Todi, 2013), 4.

³⁴ Antonino Caleca "I gruppi Toscani" in *La Deposizione Lignea in Europa, L'Immagine il Culto, la Forma* ed Giovanna Saponi e Bruno Toscano. (Perugia: Electa Editori Umbri Associati, 2004), 327.

³⁵ During the Medieval period there are several examples in which an image, either a sculpture or a painting, stimulated a mystical vision or a contact with God. The most famous example is Saint Francis and the painted Cross in San Damiano, but also Catherine of Siena, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Saint Angela of Foligno, Giacomo da Bevagna, Vanna da Orvieto, Saint Giovanni Gualberto.

Bourgogne represents Christ still attached to the cross by the left arm, while the right arm is detached and moving downward in the act of virtually receiving the faithful.

Saint Bernard's understanding of the relationship between human nature and art can help clarify whether the Descent from the Cross might have originated either in a Cistercian environment or in a more general Benedictine one. He makes a distinction in his *Sermons for the Seasons* between the soul and the body, noting that visible and material objects were necessary for both the soul and the body. He makes the correlation between the act of artistic creation and human nature itself. In one of his sermons, he asserts:

“God formed man of the slime of the earth,
and breathed into his face the breath of
life” (Gen. 2:7) Oh what an Artist, what a
Compounder of things diverse, at Whose command
the slime of the earth and the spirit
of life are thus intimately wedded together!
The slime indeed had already received existence,
When ‘in the beginning God created

heaven and earth.' (Gen. 1:7) But the spirit
had a creation proper to itself. It was not
produced in common with other things. Neither
was it created in the bodily mass, but
infused into it in a singular and excellent manner."³⁶

Saint Bernard acknowledged the importance of the artist and his act of creation, particularly the artist's ability to infuse life into inert material. The artist's mastery and good intentions provide the intelligibility of the work of art.³⁷ The Saint also recognized that the soul is capable of knowledge only through a bodily experience within the order of nature.³⁸ In his *Sermon of the Season*, he underlined:

"For 'the things are made,' (rom 1:20)
that is, those corporeal and visible things,
cannot enter into our knowledge except
through the avenues of our bodily senses.
The human soul, therefore, spiritual creature

³⁶ Bernard's Sermons for the Seasons, 1:390-91 (Second Sermon for Christmas Day) in Kilian Hufgard O.S.U., "Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, A Theory of Art Formulated From His Writing and Illustrated in Twelfth-Century Works of Art"(Queenston – Ontario: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 57.

³⁷ Ibidem., 57.

³⁸ Ibidem., 57.

though she be, has need of a body, as
without the help of this she could never
acquire that science which, like a ladder,
enables her to mount up to those higher
realities, in the contemplation of which she
finds her happiness.”³⁹

Thus, the importance of art is twofold; it serves both the spirit and the body of man. In the act of creation, the artist imitates the Creator in producing the opportunity to regain paradise through an object.⁴⁰ Saint Bernard, being aware of the spiritual purposes and beauty of art, places the process of art production and the art object itself in high regard.

In his *Apologia*, which has been historically considered a unique and important document of the Medieval understanding and attitude toward art, he argues that art is a distraction to monks in the cloisters.⁴¹ He writes specifically about the danger of being distracted by art within the monastery. It is important to note that Saint Bernard distinguishes between art for the layperson and an art for the monks. In his critique of art created for the layperson, his most important consideration is the function of the art rather than its audience, specifically the

³⁹ Ibidem., 58.

⁴⁰ Ibidem., 61.

⁴¹ Conrad Rudolph, “Bernard’s of Clairvaux’s *Apologia* as Description of Cluny, and the Controversy over Monastic Art,” *Gesta*, no. 27 (1988): 129.

pilgrimage art at pilgrimage monasteries,⁴² He criticizes the opulence of art and how artistic intention was occasionally bound to the liturgy in order to attract more money.⁴³

His criticism of monastic art, on the other hand, refers specifically to the danger of distraction away from the aim toward something that cannot embodied by materiality; because art is material, it distracts monks from focusing on their spiritual development. In his *Apologia*, he asks a series of accusatory questions in order to investigate the nature of art: "...Tell me, priests, what is gold doing in the holy place?...What is that ridiculous monstrosity doing?...What are filthy apes doing there?"⁴⁴ Saint Bernard is convinced that the spirit, since it belongs to an otherworldly realm, does not need worldly things.

He had a strong sense of love and devotion toward the Crucifixion of Christ, and it was a focal point of his religious life. He believed that artwork was not necessary in order to feel this love, and that art would indeed only serve as a

⁴² Conrad Rudolph, *The Things of Greater Importance, Bernard of Clairvaux's Apologia and the Attitude Toward Medieval Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 19.

⁴³ "Money is sown with such skill that it may be multiplied. It is expended so that it may be increased, and pouring it out produces abundance. The reason is that the very sight of these costly but wonderful illusions inflames men more to give that to pray. In this was wealth is derived from wealth, in this was money attracts money, because by I know not what law, wherever the more riches are seen, there the more willingly are offering made. Eyes are fixed on relics covered with gold and purses are opened. The thoroughly beautiful image of some male or female saint is exhibited and the saint is believed to be more holy the more highly colored the image is. People rush to kiss it [and] they are invited to donate (Apologia 28)," in Conrad Rudolph, *The Things of Grater Importance, Bernard of Clairvaux's Apologia and the Attitude Toward Medieval Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 21.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem.*, 115.

distraction away from Christ. His writings reflect an effort to connect both the intellectual and emotional sides of his understanding of Christ's suffering and love.⁴⁵ However, other aspects must to be evaluated to assert this connection between the origin of these wooden groups and their development and diffusion in a Benedictine context.

In particular, we must consider the rituality of these sculptures and how it connects the wooden Depositions from the Cross to the Benedictines. The Deposition Rite was common in Europe since the tenth century, especially in Germany and England, and was related to the reform of the Benedictine monasteries. Most likely the rite developed in a monastic context before spreading to non-monastic churches.⁴⁶ This can partially illuminate the implications of the role of the Benedictines in developing the function of the Descent from the Cross.

Benedictines in the Italian peninsula, especially those in Montecassino, were exposed to the new iconography of Christ in which he was represented expressing suffering and human essence while he was dead on the cross as early as the first half of the eleventh century. This new way of representing Christ was the result of Byzantine influence, which was made possible by the close relationship between Byzantium and Montecassino and also by the disconnection between the south of

⁴⁵ Sandro Sticca, *The Latin Passion Play, Its Origin and Development* (Albany: State University Press, 1970), 43.

⁴⁶ Powell, *Depositions*, 46.

Italy and the northern part of the peninsula due to a variety of political, geographical, and racial reasons.⁴⁷ The relationship between Byzantine culture and Montecassino was solidified at the beginning of the eleventh century because Desiderius from Benevento, who was later elected as Pope Victor III, was also abbot of Montecassino from 1058 until 1086.⁴⁸ Desiderius was responsible for the reconstruction of the monastery, and he imported many works from Byzantium. More importantly, he assembled Greek artists to work with mosaics, metal work, and illuminated manuscripts.⁴⁹ As a result, new artistic ideas arrived in Montecassino through these illuminated manuscripts, which were also used along with music and illustrated pictures. One such example is the *Exulted rolls*: “The peculiar feature of the roll is that the pictures are in reverse to the text, so as the deacon chanted and unrolled the scroll, the illustrations of the unrolled portion he had just read would fall over the back of the ambo before him, thus displaying them right side up in front of the congregation.”⁵⁰ The intention of using an illuminated scroll for liturgical purposes was based also on the symbolic and performative

⁴⁷ Sticca, *The Latin Passion Play*, 45.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem.*, 45.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem.*, 45.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem.*, 45.

values that the scroll could express, considering also the prestige of the medium itself as the carrier of the culture of the ancient world.⁵¹

Through this exposure to the Byzantine cultural milieu, the Benedictines in Montecassino showed a Christocentric attitude that was later enhanced by the writings and experience of Saint Bernard. It has also been suggested that Saint Bernard's writing and spiritual experiences affected the devotion toward the Passion of Christ and promoted a dramatic representation of the Passion itself,⁵² which would justify the production of one of the oldest Passion plays in the West found in the Benedictine environment of Montecassino. This work was produced in the middle of the twelfth century in the abbey of Montecassino by an anonymous playwright who was probably a monk.⁵³ Considering the complexity of the structure and the language, this play was meant to be performed rather than just read. However, there is no evidence that this play was ever performed at the Monastery of Montecassino or in other locations; we can only suppose it was.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Nino Zchomelidse, *Art, Ritual, and Civic Identity in Medieval Southern Italy* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania, 2014), 34-71. Particularly for this situation the scroll added also symbolic and iconographic significance of the medium as the carrier of the culture of the ancient world. In addition to that the idea of adding images to the text, it added a performative value

⁵² Sticca, *The Latin Passion Play*, 43.

⁵³ Robert Edward, *The Montecassino Passion and the Poetics of Medieval Drama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 1.

⁵⁴ Melody Sue Owens, "The Montecassino Passion Play: Theatre in a Monastic Community" (PhD diss. University of California, Berkeley, 1987), 5.

Robert Edwards wrote a study about the Montecassino Passion Play and its role in Medieval drama, in which he stresses its differences from previous and subsequent forms and its relationship with the visual arts. Besides the direct Benedictine connection, it has been highlighted how this Passion Play was produced during the “golden age” of the Montecassino monastery, which occurred while the abbot Desiderius was ruling and rebuilding the Monastery. There is a section of Edwards’ study devoted to the relationship between iconographical sources and visual images in order to elicit meaning. He suggests that there is a connection between the drama and book illustration production, and that the play could have been a counterpart to the miniature cycle. According to Edwards, the most evident connection between drama and art was found in the manuscript of the play itself. He argues that “the manuscript leaves room for twelve miniatures,” and though they were never executed, they would have most likely followed those depicted in the monastery.⁵⁵ In addition, Gospel accounts could have provided an outline for the progression of scenes, and the dialogue served as a visual source for the scenes.⁵⁶

It is important to note that in a Benedictine environment, especially one as important as Montecassino, the creation of a Passion Play was influenced primarily by illuminated manuscripts rather than by images of the Descent from the Cross.

⁵⁵ Edward, *The Montecassino Passion*, 96.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem.*, 95.

One reason for this phenomenon is the Benedictine religious order itself.

Benedictine monasticism was considered in some cases the “highest order” of the contemplative life;⁵⁷ the core of their monasticism was “its commitment to the pursuit of religious perfection and at the heart of that [...] was a large measure of asceticism, meaning denial of the flesh and the world.”⁵⁸ This ascetic attitude and its concentration in monastic life does not align with the main and supposed use of the wooden Descent from the Cross, theatrical use.

These sculptures’ theatrical use entails their constant display during specific religious holidays or their dynamic interactions with structures, objects, and actors during the liturgical year.⁵⁹ By claiming to be the primary religious order in Christian society, Benedictines believed and acted in a heavenly and world-denying rule.⁶⁰ They had rich churches, rituals, and art within the walls of their monastery, yet their liturgy and spirituality did not allow for any theatrical dimensions. They particularly rejected the use of sculptures for public celebrations and for rituals directly involving the faithful. The wooden sculptures of the Descent were used specifically for this type of public celebration and rituals.

⁵⁷ John Van Engen, “Crisis of Cenobitism Reconsidered: Benedictine Monasticism in the Years 1050-1150,” *Speculum*, no 2 (1986): 269.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem.*, 285.

⁵⁹ Claudio Bernardi, “Deposizioni e Annunciazioni” in *Il Teatro delle Statue, Gruppi Lignei di Deposizione e Annunciazione tra il XII e il XIII Secolo*,” ed Francesca Flores D’Arcais (Milano: Vita & Pensiero, 2003), 69.

⁶⁰ Van Engen, *Crisis of Cenobitism*, 289.

Benedictines had contact with the lay community and also with the high ranks of society, such as princes and kings, but their role was to serve as intercessors to the divine, and they considered themselves to be “society’s spiritual warriors.”⁶¹ They were in charge of housing important medieval relics such as Saint-Foy at Conques, Saint-Benoît at Fleury, and Saint Madeleine at Vézelay in their monasteries. They were aware of the spiritual power associated with relics,⁶² and were in contact and assisted with the arrival of many pilgrims visiting the holy places where the relics were displayed. They proclaimed themselves to be the intercessors between pilgrims and the holy remains of the saints, but despite frequent contact with the laity, their vigilant and spiritual role was not as active and interactive as we might consider, for example, the Franciscans.

Their art-related material prosperity, as previously mentioned, was a target of Saint Bernard’s *Apologia* because of the possible distraction of the monks from their spiritual duties toward God. Saint Bernard himself recognizes the importance of art and its precious spiritual role but criticizes the lavishness of some objects, particularly the presence of gold for spiritual matters. While pilgrimage art became increasingly important to maintain a high level of income for the monastery, Saint Bernard condemns this explicit manipulation of art along with the avarice of some

⁶¹ Ibidem., 293.

⁶² Ibidem., 296

monks;⁶³ it is the remunerative power that he opposes, not the spiritual power or the presence of the artwork within the liturgy. Dealing with art and artworks was an important part of the Benedictine community, and they were easily exposed to precious material as well.

The documents of the *Regularis Concordia*, dated around 965-975 and developed in a Benedictine environment, note that the *Visitatio Sepulchri*, which involves the rituals of the *Elevatio* and *Depositio* in which a sculpture of Christ or plain cross could have been used, was used in the English Abbey of Durham. It is unclear whether it was only a cross or if there was also a figure of Christ, but we know that in 1593 a sculpture of Christ was used in Durham.⁶⁴ It is possible that wooden sculptures could have been used in Holy Friday celebrations since the Early Middle Ages, especially for the dramatic reenactment of the *Depositio* and *Elevatio*, and with a full reenactment of the Descent from the Cross as well.⁶⁵ However, the monastic life of the Benedictines, their role in the medieval religious context, and the liturgical aspects of their order, contrast with connecting the development of the wooden group of the Descent from the Cross directly with the Benedictines.

When Saint Bernard criticizes the possibility of distraction for the monks, he refers to a dimension in which there was supposed to be ardent devotion and a

⁶³ Conrad Rudolph, *The Things*, 195.

⁶⁴ Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church – Vol I* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), 137.

⁶⁵ Michele Bacci, "Le Sculture Lignee nel Folklore Religioso: alcune Considerazioni" in *Scultura Lignea – Lucca 1200 – 1425* ed by Clara Baracchini (Firenze: Studio per Edizioni Scelte), 35.

personal relationship with God within the religious order. Even though Cistercian art was pure and simple according to the will and direction of Saint Bernard, his concern over the potential distraction of art applies to monks as well as lay people all together in one religious community. Thus, when Saint Bernard talks about art he discusses the situation within the abbeys as well because Cistercians, as an order, had a “strict desire of solitude for all of their abbeys and prohibited general access to their churches.”⁶⁶ Therefore, I argue that despite the interesting possible connection, it will be difficult to link the development of the wooden Descent from the Cross and its usage involving the whole community to a religious order that prefers meditation and solitude in reaching God.

The fact that some of the Descents from the Cross were found in cathedrals and parish churches may link the existence and use of these wooden group sculptures to these places. In fact, the diffusion of cathedrals seems to correspond chronologically with the production of the wooden Descent from the Cross. The Spoleto Cathedral, originally built in the second half of the twelfth century and renovated throughout time, is an example of Romanesque architecture. In his pastoral visit to the Cathedral in 1712, Giacinto Lascaris mentioned with accurate

⁶⁶ Jean Leclercq, *Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercians Spirit* (Kalamazoo: Michigan, 1976), 18.

detail the existence of a wooden group of the Descent from the Cross in the chapel known as "*Cappella delle Immagini*."⁶⁷

In Italy overall, these wooden groups of the Descent from the Cross can be found in both the Benedictine context and also in cathedrals, parishes, or Augustine churches. The Benedictine influence on the structure of the liturgy, in relation to the ritual of the *Depositio Crucis*, is not similarly seen on the creation and use of wooden groups of the Descent from the Cross. One possible hypothesis, without relying so strictly on distribution numbers,⁶⁸ is that the wooden groups of the Descent from the Cross could have been produced in a Benedictine environment, mostly for display or adoration, while others that were found in Cathedrals, Pievis, or Augustinian churches are those that could have been utilized for liturgical and ritual purposes directly and actively involving the faithful. This hypothesis, along with an analysis of the function of these wooden sculptures in affecting medieval devotion

⁶⁷ A.D.S., Visita Lascaris, 1712-1715; for the transcription see *Trascrizioni* edited by di L. Andreani, R. Chiovelli, P. Mercurelli Salari, in *La Cattedrale di Spoleto* (nota 2), p. 495. "La seconda cappella si chiama volgarmente Cappella delle Immagini. Ha un altare provveduto decentemente di supplettili sagre, nel di cui frontespicio vi è una croce di legno di rilievo, nella quale è dipinta la imagine dell SS. Crocifisso ed a' lati di detta croce vi sono le imagini della Beata Vergine e di San Giovanni come pure le statue di loegno di rilievo di Nicodemo e Giosepe d'Arimatea in atto di deporre dalla croce il Crocefisso. In quest'altare vi sono le armi della città di Spoleto con la seguente iscrizione intagliata nel marmo.....".

⁶⁸ Giovanna Saponi e Bruno Toscano, "Proposte per un Ordinamento di Materiali e Problemi" in *La Deposizione Lignea in Europa, L'Immagine il Culto, la Forma*. (Perugia: Electa Editori Umbri Associati, 2004),19. According to the chart in this study about the Descent from the Cross in Europe, the original certified location of the extant Descent from the Cross is: four from Cathedrals, three from Parish church, and seven from Benedictine Churches. The remaining Descents are cataloged according to a probable original location: one from Cathedrals, two from parish churches, three from Benedictines churches, three from Augustinian churches, and two from Confraternities.

and pictorial production of the late Medieval period, will be the subject of the following chapter.

Chapter 2

The Descent from the Cross and Medieval Piety

One of the problems in studying the wooden groups of the Descent from the Cross, and medieval wooden sculpture in general, is that easy and general “categories” were applied historically that prevented them from critical observation. They were considered mere “devotional objects,” downgraded because of the use of perishable wood and oftentimes repeatedly repainted, thus considered “peasant like and crude in workmanship.”¹ These opinions enduringly and negatively labeled the wooden groups and adversely affected their study. Therefore, despite the lack of primary sources and the small number of extant examples in comparison to the original production, several aspects need to be reevaluated that can affect our understanding of the devotional context of late Medieval and early Renaissance Italy, and, above all, can reevaluate these artworks’ position in the history of art of thirteenth-century Italy. This chapter will deal with the importance of the sculpted version of iconography of the Descent from the cross and its relationship with the devotional literature of the period.

¹ Géza De Francovich, A Romanesque School of Wood Carvers in Central Italy, “*The Art Bulletin*”, Vol. 19, No. 1 (1937), 46.

The Role of the sculpted version of the Descent from the Cross

The physical world was considered to be a sort of a continuation of the supernatural world in the Middle Ages; materials played an important part in medieval cosmology, as did art production itself.² As with the majority of medieval art, we need to keep in mind that the production of some objects was an artistic response to a liturgical or devotional need. Since the beginning of its production in the medieval West, art was meant to educate. St Gregory the Great summarized the didactic role of the images:

One thing is the adoration of an image, another thing is to learn what to adore from the story rendered by the image. For what the Scriptures teach those who read, this same image shows to those who cannot read but see; because in it even the ignorant see whom they ought to follow, in the image those who do not know letters are able to read.³

About seven hundred years later, Saint Thomas Aquinas reiterated a similar sentiment:

² Herbert Kessler, On the State of Medieval Art History, *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 70, N. 2 (1988), 172.

³ St Gregory, *Ep. XI*: 13 (P.L., 77 cols. 1128, 1129), as quoted in Ringbom, Sixten. *Icon to Narrative: the Rise of the Dramatic Close-Up in Fifteenth-Century Devotional Painting* (Doornspijk, Dovaco Publishers, 1984), 11.

The images of Christ and the saints were made for three reasons: first, for the instruction of the unlettered, who are taught by these images as if they were books; secondly, so that the mystery of the incarnation and the example of saints may remain the better in our memory, when they are presented daily to our eyes; thirdly, so that a feeling of devotion may be excited, which can be aroused more successfully by things seen than heard.⁴

These statements supported the Christian theory toward images and justified, at least in the West, their production and use. At the same time, the liturgy affected the reception of Byzantine iconography from the East, which was adapted to the Western devotional context through the adjustment of icon panels as altarpieces or devotional images.⁵ In order to understand artistic images, it is pivotal to consider the fundamental reasons for their creation and use. Historically, both Saint Gregory the Great and Saint Thomas Aquinas refer to images, particularly painted images, yet they do not refer specifically to sculptures. This is most likely due to a general restraint around sculptures on account of the impending risk of idolatry. However, wooden sculptures, especially in the form of the Crucifixion, appear as early as the

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica, Secunda Secundae*, III, 175-76, as quoted in Catherine King "Effigies: human and divine" in *Siena, Florence and Padua; Art, Society and Religion 1280 – 1400* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press in association with the Open University, 1995), 126.

⁵ Kessler, *On the State of Medieval Art*, 174.

Carolingian era. A beautiful example is the *Gero Cross* (**Fig 1**), even if it was made during the Ottonian period.

Painted representations of the Descent from the Cross (see Chapter 1) existed far before the oldest extant examples of the wooden sculptural version. Yet rather than viewing a competition between the two media, we should instead seek to understand how they relate to their religious contexts, particularly their roles in shaping devotion in the late Medieval period and in Renaissance art. In some cases, especially in France, the Descent of the Cross was represented on the entrance door of Cathedrals or in other prominent positions as if they had the same function as the representation of the Crucifixion.⁶ The Descent from the Cross, despite its use in a ritual context, had a privileged space even in a symbolic dimension, and was compared to as well as able to substitute the representation of the Crucifixion. This could be due to the fact that the Descent could have been considered as the beginning of the Resurrection process, which would stress the humanity of Christ in a direct yet different way than the suffering of the Crucifixion.⁷

⁶ Gaborit Jean-René, “Le Rappresentazioni Scolpite della Deposizione in Francia dal X al XIV Secolo” in *La Deposizione Lignea in Europa, L’Immagine il Culto, la Forma* ed Giovanna Saponi e Bruno Toscano (Perugia: Electa Editori Umbri Associati, 2004), 453.

⁷ Robert Didier, “Une Descente de Croix Sculptée Mosane du XI siècle. A propos du Christ de l’Ancienne “Curva Crux’ de Louvain”, in *La Deposizione Lignea in Europa, L’Immagine il Culto, la Forma* ed Giovanna Saponi e Bruno Toscano. (Perugia: Electa Editori Umbri Associati, 2004), 423-448.

It is important to understand the changing patterns of spirituality during the late Medieval period and its evolution toward a more elaborate and visceral relationship between the objects, the viewer, and religious society. While we have only few primary sources, invaluable Counter Reformation Pastoral Visits can be used retroactively to understand sculptures made during the Middle Ages. Additionally, we can rely on the objects themselves and their changes throughout time, either iconographically or in relation to their use, to provide evidence of the impact they had not only within a devotional context but also to art history.

One of the most researched and well-known aspects of medieval piety is the development of devotion toward the suffering Christ and the need for the laity to approach and experience Christ's humanity in an emphatic way. This change in relation to the humanity of Christ affected several aspects of medieval religious society: the art production as well as the liturgy and religious literature. While this study cannot cover these different aspects with exhaustive attention, I will keep them in mind in order to support this reevaluation of the medieval wooden Descent from the Cross.

This concentration on the humanity and Passion of Christ was not new or unique to the Middle Ages. Texts in the Greek East mention Christ's humanity since

the second century, and Western texts since the sixth century.⁸ Yet it isn't until the eleventh and twelfth centuries that Passion liturgy shows a new interest toward this crucial moment of Christ's life, which involved a new reading of the Bible in order to support and provide an "authoritative testimony to His humanity and suffering."⁹ Bernard of Clairvaux is a prominent example of how the Passion figure and the suffering of Christ attracted many theological and mystical interpretations.¹⁰ Once there was a general interest in the humanity of Christ, devotional life was consequently affected in all its aspects. However, while there are artistic reproductions of the different stages of the Passion of Christ, especially the last moments such as the Crucifixion, Descent from the Cross and Entombment in different media and in different periods, there is not a corresponding equivalent interest by scholarship and historiography, particularly to sculpture.

The first issue related to these objects is that at a certain point the wooden group of the Descent from the Cross began to appear in churches (**Fig 2**). This was not a new subject, yet the subject was suddenly being produced through a new

⁸ James H. Marrow, *Passion Iconography in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance, A Study of the Transformation of Sacred Metaphor into Descriptive Narrative* (Kortrijk: Van Ghemmert Publishing Company, 1979), 7.

⁹ *Ibidem.*, 191.

¹⁰ Belting, *The Image and its Public*, 172.

medium. Therefore, we must investigate how this new way of representing the subject changed and affected piety, as well as the viewer's relationship with the subject itself, its use, and the surrounding liturgy. An important aspect of these wooden groups is that they are independent in the church space. They cannot be classified as monumental sculptures, or as contemporary examples of sculptures, either Crucifixions or the Virgin Mary enthroned with Child, which are attached to either the cross or the throne. Rather, the wooden sculptures of the Descent from the Cross acquired a more autonomous identity, possessing their own physical space.¹¹ Since Gregory the Great's letter that supported the use of images for religious purposes, one of the main characteristics of medieval religious images was their reminiscence about Bible stories and the Gospels, specifically those dedicated to the Passion of Christ.¹² On this account, it is pivotal to recognize the intent behind the production of images and their ability to affect the viewer and facilitate this process of meditation. In other words, the wooden Descent from the Cross solidified and added another more complex level to the relationship between object and viewer.

¹¹ Giovanni Romano, "Conclusioni", in *La Deposizione Ligneo in Europa, L'Immagine il Culto, la Forma* ed Giovanna Saporì e Bruno Toscano. (Perugia: Electa Editori Umbri Associati, 2004), 498-499.

¹² Carla Bino, *Dal Trionfo al Pianto: la Fondazione del Teatro della Misericordia nel Medioevo (V- XIII Secolo)* (Milano: Vita e pensiero, 2008), 145.

The Descent from the Cross shows the supreme instance of the mortality of Christ. Christ is taken down from the cross by Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, and according to the Gospel only the Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist assisted in this dramatic moment. While the faithful can only visually experience the death of Christ in the Crucifixion through either paintings or sculptures, the Descent from the Cross offers the faithful a chance to *embrace* this mortality, to be part of it and experience it viscerally due to the life size and medium, as opposed to the distance from which they could relate to the painted or sculpted Crucifixion.

More than the painted (**Fig 3**) or sculpted versions such as the Descent by Benedetto Antelami (**Fig 4**), the wooden sculpted Descents from the Cross provided symbolic and physical access to this dramatic moment of the Passion. This is due to their independent setting in the church space, their life size dimension, and their presentation of the gesture of Christ, with open arms, ready to be symbolically embraced. The moment represented either in painting (fresco or illuminated manuscript) or sculpture (other than wood) is the same; neither change the conceptual role of the representation. Instead, the wooden sculpture adds, along with the holiness of the representation, an interactive dimension that had an innovative impact on medieval devotion. Moreover, the Descents from the Cross were not the only wooden sculptures produced and used during this period: the

representation of the Virgin Mary enthroned with Child and the Crucifixion of Christ were in use since the Carolingian revival of classical and Byzantine forms. These sculptural productions were considered to have the same function as the secular *portraits* and, following the Byzantine idea and representation of the prototype, were not considered idolatrous.¹³ The tridimensional form, which more effectively represented the presence of Christ or the Virgin Mary, also guaranteed an easier transcendent experience. The medium of the sculpture itself completely manifested the presence of the prototypes within the realm of the faithful; the role of these objects as intermediaries between the earthly world and the divine dimension was a widespread and well known condition behind their production.¹⁴

The Descent from the Cross might have followed the same conceptual path at the beginning of their production, but the subject, size, staging, and use in the later period all show a different dimension from the preceding sculptural production of the Crucifixion and the Virgin Mary enthroned. In fact, the Virgin Mary enthroned with Child was developed after the so called *sedes sapientiae* (**Fig 5**), a representation of the Virgin and Child that, despite the sculptural medium, shows an authoritative aura that does not allow or suggest a compassionate relationship with

¹³ Ilene H. Forsyth, *The Throne of Wisdom; Wood Sculptures of the Madonna in Romanesque France* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972), 91.

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*, 91.

the viewer. As for the Crucifixion, despite the fact that we find a range of representations from the triumphant Christ to the suffering Christ or the dead Christ, it is important to note the virtual distance that separates the body of Christ from the faithful, making it conceptually inaccessible to them¹⁵. Even if Christ is represented as dead on the cross, he and his body are still unreachable, inviting more of a contemplative relationship than a bodily connection. However, the Descent from the Cross allows a crucial accessibility to the body of Christ in the moment during which his humanity is best expressed, the powerless moment of death. The presence of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea provides the physical access to the space in which the Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist are close to the body of Christ. The role and presence of both Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were close to that of ordinary lay people. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea offered themselves as an act of piety and faith to Christ, through whom ordinary lay people could see themselves, facilitating the closeness and access to the body of Christ.

Therefore, the wooden Descent from the Cross needs to be seen in a different perspective than other wooden sculptures. The Deposition rite, whether it includes

¹⁵ As regards of the change of iconography in wooden sculptures from the Christus Triumphant to the Christus Patiens and Virgin enthroned with Child in Europe see: Jacopo Lorenzelli, Pietro Lorenzelli and Veca, Alberto, and Galleria Lorenzelli. *Custode Dell'immagine: Scultura Ligneae Europea XII-XV Secolo*. Galleria Lorenzelli, 1987.

these wooden groups or not, has never been officially approved in the liturgy of Rome,¹⁶ which allows different local religious and lay communities to shape it according to their devotional desires or circumstances. This indirectly shows the power of the ritual itself and its capability to affect devotion during the late Medieval period.

Scholarship generally addresses these wooden groups of the Descent from the Cross from an iconographical perspective and tries to understand the artists responsible for these objects. One argument is that the production and use of these objects lasted only about ninety years; thereafter they were considered too old to be used or no longer appropriately adaptable to the devotional context of the period.¹⁷ Conversely, I propose that the scene of the Descent from the Cross was still used conceptually; however, the physical sculptures of the group were later substituted with real people who reenacted the scene. This was possible because of the independent physical space they occupied as well as the dimensions of the statues. In fact, all the Descent from the Cross sculptures were life-size, according to extant

¹⁶ Amy Powell, *Depositions: Scenes from the Late Medieval Church and the Modern Museum* (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 81.

¹⁷ Bruno Toscano, Giovanna Saponi, "La Deposizione Ligneo: da una Mostra ad una Summa" in *Il Teatro delle Statue: Gruppi Lignei di Deposizione e Annunciazione tra XII e XIII Secolo : Atti del Convegno "Attorno ai Gruppi Lignei della Deposizione" : Milano, 15-16 Maggio 2003, Museo Diocesano Fondazione S. Ambrogio, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore*, edited by Francesca Flores D'Arcais (Milano: V&P., 2005), 9-20.

examples. Thus the faithful were able to interact not only with the tridimensionality of the sculptures, but also with an object that was of the same size. Additionally, when the group of the Descent was dismissed in order to first keep the single sculpture of Christ, and later the animated Christ with movable arms, this allowed an even greater sense of likeness and presence, and it contributed to the viewer's further identification with the body of Christ.

One important aspect that deserves further attention to better understand the role and impact of the wooden sculptures is their human-like size. All the characters in these groups (**Fig 6**) were life-size, and according to the iconographical typologies, they combine the presentation of the moment of the Descent. At the same time, they invite the faithful to embrace the body of Christ, as suggested by the gesture of the Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist. Furthermore, the life-size dimension of the groups facilitate an identification with Christ and thus encourage a deeper participation in the rite.

The Virgin Mary (**Fig 7**) from the group of the Descent in the Cathedral of San Lorenzo in Scala (Salerno, Italy, second half of the thirteenth century), is shown receiving the hand of Christ. In addition to the size and gesture, the miraculous preservation of the painting demonstrates the high level of likeness that these sculptures were able to achieve. Similarly to paintings, the sad expression of the

sculpted Virgin Mary was a tool to illustrate how to emotionally participate in front of the dead body of Christ. Yet with sculpture the gesture could become real, and it could be shared with those that assisted in the scene. John the Evangelist (**Fig 8**) is another example of the ability of these sculptures to embody a real physical presence beyond their tridimensional essence. John the Evangelist, despite the “imperfections” of sculpture of the period in comparison to the canon of perfection typical of the Renaissance, reaches a level of expressivity that was exceptional for the period.¹⁸ In addition, the sculpted face of Christ is the result of an attentive observation of the anatomy of the body. Especially in the rendering of the beard, the details of Christ’s image show an attention to the body that cannot be overlooked. While the extant examples of the Descent show a range of styles, they have one constant element: the intent to present the scene so that it combines the embodied symbolic meaning with a realistic representation which makes these figures accessible to the faithful.

The Descent from the Cross, in its dynamic essence, is an example of how medieval art reflects aspects such as, among others, extralitururgical rituals and

¹⁸ Filippo Trevisani “La Vergine, San Giovanni Evangelista, Scala Salerno, Cattedrale di San Lorenzo” in *La Deposizione Ligne in Europa, L’Immagine il Culto, la Forma* ed Giovanna Saporì e Bruno Toscano. (Perugia: Electa Editori Umbri Associati, 2004), 141-148.

¹⁸ Carla Bino, *Dal Trionfo al Pianto: la Fondazione del Teatro della Misericordia nel Medioevo (V- XIII Secolo)* (Milano: Vita e pensiero, 2008), 143.

participation, that are not strictly religious or symbolical, but instead are the result of a collective will and proper aesthetic that reflects the individual and social devotional need.

Another aspect that stresses the realism and humanity of the sculpture is the rendering of veins on the body of the Deposed Christ, now preserved at the Castello Sforzesco in Milan (**Fig 9**). Additionally, the Deposed Christ from Cascia (Italy) (**Fig 10**), now preserved in the Museo of Palazzo Santi as the only surviving figure from a group of the Descent, has pubic hair painted above the loincloth (**Fig 11**). This sculpture dates around the beginning of the fourteenth century; it could have been repainted during the time, or the pubic hair could have been a later addition to the original creation. What is interesting, however, is that such a sculpture could be altered by adding a very specific and important detail because the sole purpose of the sculpture was to create a relationship with the faithful rather than to embody an abstract aesthetic ideal. Whether or not the pubic hair was painted over the original paint or initially present is not important. What is significant is that these sculptures, conceived earlier than paintings, considered anatomical aspects of the body essential to ensure an identification with the faithful.

The property of paint regarding these sculptures has been studied with mixed approaches. Though we consider these objects as sculptures, they were also

remodeled with plaster and other materials and were, above all, painted. One property that downgraded these sculptures and negatively affected our understanding of them is that they were often repainted over their original layer of color in order to hide any signs of wear. From the perspective of restorers, this became a limitation; once a wooden sculpture is brought into a studio to be restored, the cleaning and the preservation of the original color is often a goal of the process. In addition, scholars judged the rediscovery of the original color as essential to the conservation and understanding of the sculpture.

Now is not the moment or the place to analyze the different theories about restoration or the best actions to take on the subject of colors or preservation. My point is that the negative scholarly opinion toward the recoloring and alteration of the original tone of colors, especially in comparison with the “beauty” and pureness of marble sculptures, has affected the study of wooden sculptures. However, it is crucial to understand that their repainting over time is a sign of their capability to adapt themselves to what I define as the “devotional taste” of the period. Specifically for the Descent from the Cross, and later for the animated sculptures of the Crucified Christ, the style was not just a feature of the artwork that reflected the period primarily as an aesthetic trait, but also as a cultural carrier of meaning. In this case, it is how the style intertwines with the function of the sculptures that makes these

artworks unique. In this context, the action of repainting the sculptures was not a lack of taste. Instead, it was a way to keep these sculptures “alive,” and to revitalize the dialogue with the faithful in order to facilitate identification and participation.¹⁹

We need to revise how we look at this action of renovating sculptures. On the one hand renovation may modify the original essence of the sculpture, and on the other it shows the sculpture’s capability to adapt through time and to be an active protagonist of the devotional context of the period. This occurred with painting in a similar way, but for sculpture it centered on the different use and role of these objects. Paintings were also made from materials that were vulnerable to time; as a consequence they also needed to be restored, freshened, and sometimes even replaced. This was especially common with icons. However, since thirteenth-century icons were treated like relics, they were not improved with over-paintings and alterations.²⁰ The act of repainting sculptures was not connected as strongly to the perishable nature of the material, but rather to their use and to the visceral relationship between the sculptures, the liturgy, and the faithful. The sculptures

¹⁹ Bino, *Dal Trionfo al Pianto*, 16. The process of making these sculptures has been classified as follows: a) un artefice, forse un collaboratore che possiamo considerare una specie di “formatore”, consegna il legno sbozzato e compost. b) il maestro lo rilavora fino a raggiungere un livello di intaglio funzionale all’esecuzione della fase successive; c) lo stesso impanna, ingessa, stucco d’oro in foglia o a mecca, applica lamine di argento o di stagno, dipinge a corpo o a velatura o a tratto sull’imprimitura o sulle lamine.

²⁰ Alexander Nagel, and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 71-73.

were repainted to adapt them to the taste of the period and to ensure that the faithful were easily stimulated in the process of identification and worship. An example is the group of the Descent of San Miniato al Tedesco (**Fig 12**). The restoration of the group started in 1997 and brought back the original structure and color. The sculptures were heavily altered during a complete remodeling of the whole group, the last of which was dated on the nineteenth century.²¹ (**Fig 13**) For the sculptures of the Descent from the Cross, these alterations involved not only the painting of the sculptures, but also modification of their structure. The fact that they were repainted indicates the adaptation of the sculptures to the visual context in which they were activated. It also confirms the importance of understanding use and function of the sculptures to fully comprehend them.

The functionality of these sculptures was only one aspect that affected these sculptures and their liturgical use. The case of the Deposed Christ from the Cattedrale di San Catero in Tolentino (Macerata) (**Fig 14**) offers an example of the role of these sculptures and the modification they underwent due to their liturgical use. This particular sculpture of the Deposed Christ has been repainted over the original color and structurally modified in order to satisfy changing ritual needs.

²¹ Burrese Mariagiulia, Antonino Caleca, "Sacre Passioni: il Cristo Deposto del Duomo di Pisa e le Deposizioni di Volterra, Vicopisano e San Miniato" in *Sacre passioni: Scultura lignea a Pisa dal XII al XV secolo*. ed Maria Giulia Burrese (Milano: F. Motta, 2000), 43.

The sculpture was modified from the Crucified Christ with fixed open arms to the Deposed Christ with open arms in the act of being received by the Virgin Mary, John the Evangelist and, metaphorically, the faithful. It was then transformed into the Dead Christ, with arms stretched parallel to the body so it was easier to use for the Passion celebration and rituals during Holy Week, in which it was carried in its deathbed through the town. The sculpture, made during the second half of the thirteenth century, was modified at the beginning of the twentieth century. Despite the large amount of time between when it was made and the moment of its modification, the sculpture worked as an active agent during the interim period, a presence that needed to be modified according to the devotional needs of the faithful and, specifically in this case, the Confraternity of the Dead Christ.²² This could be because these sculptures were made to satisfy a specific ceremonial use, one that entails the capability to provide both the symbolic and bodily presence of Christ, rather than serving just as devotional objects. This is an intrinsic characteristic of multiple sculptures that needs to be reevaluated. The fact that a crucified Christ made during the thirteenth century was modified at the beginning of

²² Bruno Bruni, "Tolentino (Macerata), Cattedrale di San Catervo, in *La Deposizione Ligneata in Europa, L'Immagine il Culto, la Forma* ed Giovanna Saporì e Bruno Toscano. (Perugia: Electa Editori Umbri Associati, 2004), 219.

the twentieth century demonstrates its potential to renew itself throughout time rather than exist as a simple product of the period in which it was made.

Clearly the rituality of the Middle Ages has changed through time; the point is not to analyze the faithfulness of the original ritual, nor is the argument that the ritual in which the faithful assist and participate today is the result of something unchanged through time. The point is to realize that, despite the changes that occurred throughout the centuries, these sculptures were (and in some cases still are) used, venerated, and respected as a true presence and likeness of Christ. These wooden sculptures achieved a likeness that was adapted to the taste and devotional needs of the time, yet remained unchanged in their essence and aesthetic. These sculptures, once activated, gained the same aura and role for which they were made: representing and embodying the true presence of Christ.

We need to consider that the verisimilitude of these sculptures, while being a specific and important trait of these objects, would have also been enhanced by the use of the sculptures during the procession shifting the likeness into the realm of mimesis.²³ According to documentation and to the style of the existing examples, around the second half of the thirteenth century the wooden groups of the Descent from the Cross stopped being produced because their iconography no longer

²³ Susan Verdi Webster, *Art and ritual in Golden-Age Spain: Sevillian confraternities and the processional sculpture of Holy Week* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 167.

reflected the devotional context of the period and was no longer functional to the narrative of the scene. This is due to the development of new ways of living the Passion of Christ, promoted particularly by the mendicant orders and lay confraternities. They held performances in both public and private spheres that expressed the Passion through chants, processions, passion plays, public penance, and the recitation of *laude*.²⁴ Even though the wooden groups of the Descent from the Cross stopped being produced, so that what we study today is the remainder of a larger production that occurred between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there is more that needs to be deeply analyzed in order to offer new interpretations of these wooden groups.

In general, the production of wooden sculptures, and sculpture as a whole, was more common in the West, especially because of the stronger influence of Latin culture, in comparison to the East.²⁵ The risk of idolatry was first overcome by the use of sculptures that also functioned as reliquaries and also from the position that the West taken in comparison to the East. The West was more concerned with the

²⁴ Claudio Bernardi, "Deposizioni e Annunciazioni", in *Il teatro delle Statue: Gruppi Lignei di Deposizione e Annunciazione tra XII e XIII secolo : Atti del Convegno "Attorno ai Gruppi Lignei della Deposizione" : Milano, 15-16 Maggio 2003, Museo Diocesano Fondazione S. Ambrogio, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore*, edited by Francesca Flores D'Arcais (Milano: V&P., 2005), 78.

²⁵ Marco Collareta, "Le Immagini e l'Arte. Riflessioni sulla Scultura Dipinta nelle Fonti Letterarie", in *Scultura lignea: Lucca 1200-1425*. Edited by Clara Baracchini (Firenze: Studio per Edizioni Scelte, 1995), 1.

problem of idolatry and heresy rather than the nature of images and the violation of the Second Commandment.²⁶ In fact, the West was interested and involved more on the function of images and the appropriate way of worshipping these images.²⁷ The sculpture was the container of the relic, and at the same time the relic would justify its container, the human shaped sculpture. Since sculptures, especially wooden sculptures, were increasingly produced throughout time, there was no longer a need for the presence of relics, and sculptures instead began to exist independently, providing the “real” presence of the subject represented.

The first sculptures made without being linked to a relic were Crucifixes, followed by the Virgin enthroned with Child. In this line, the Descent from the Cross represented a peculiar case. Besides representing a specific moment of the Passion of Christ, one obviously different than the Crucifixion, the wooden sculpted version

²⁶ Beate Fricke and Andrew Griebeler, *Fallen Idols, Risen Saints: Sainte Foy of Conques and the Revival of Monumental Sculpture in Medieval Art*, Studies in the visual cultures of the Middle Ages ; v. 7, (Turnhout, Belgium: Grafikon), 266.

The article written by Ellert Dahl “Heavenly Images. The Statue of Sainte-Foy of Conques and the Signification of the Medieval Cult-Image in the West” offers also an interesting explanation of the use of tridimensional images for devotional use in the West. Dahl explains the relationship between the statue that housed the saint’s relic and the saint active from Heaven. He used primary sources in order to explain and justify the use of a certain kind of material and the likeness of the sculpture itself. See Ellert Dahl “Heavenly Images. The Statue of Sainte-Foy of Conques and the Signification of the Medieval Cult-Image in the West” in *Acta Arcaeologiam et Atrium Historiam Pertinentia*, (Vol 8, 1978), 175-191. Also for the study or relics and relic veneration see Martina Bagnoli, *Cleveland Museum of Art, and British Museum, Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe*. Cleveland, Ohio] Baltimore : London : New Haven [Conn.]: Cleveland Museum of Art ; Walters Art Museum ; The British Museum; Yale University Press, 2010.

²⁷ Beate Fricke, *Fallen Idols*, 266.

of the Descent represented a crucial moment in the relationship between images and the faithful. The use of these sculptures involves not only their display and contemplation, but also their combination with the recitation of liturgical texts, sacred hymns, or *laude*. This created a dimension of compassionate participation that corresponded with the life-size dimensions and setting of these sculptures. Previous scholarship has already recognized that images, either sculptures or paintings, were in strict symbiosis with religious texts. Yet one underestimation is that this relationship is frequently considered to be static, particularly in relation to the wooden Descent from the Cross. Existing scholarship argues that these sculptures were used during readings of devotional texts and also in other liturgical or paraliturgical situations. It has also been agreed upon that once the liturgy changed, these groups were dismissed.

In fact, since the wooden Descent from the Cross's most peculiar features – their dimension, color, and their attempt to naturalistically represent this moment of the Passion of Christ – allowed a participation that went farther than just identification, they were not dismissed as obsolete when they stopped being used. It could be argued that this process alone was one of *substitution*.²⁸ Through the

²⁸ The use of this word needs some clarifications. The scholars Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood have used the term *substitution* in the book *Anachronic Renaissance*. In Chapter 3 of their book, they explain the term: "To perceive an artifact in substitutional terms was to understand it as

liturgy and the sculptural medium, the faithful were able to identify themselves as bystanders and participate physically, even though these were primarily visual approaches to the celebration of the Descent and the burial. This relationship also changed as a consequence of the major religious changes during the thirteenth century: not only the development of mendicant orders such as Dominicans and Franciscans, but also the Fourth Council of the Lateran in 1215. The establishment of the dogma of the *Transubstantiation* placed a great emphasis on the bodily manifestation and presence of Christ. In the *Transubstantiation*: “The blood and the body of Christ are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar under the forms of bread and wine. The bread is changed by divine power into the body, and the wine

belonging to more than one historical moment simultaneously. The artifact was connected to its unknowable point of origin by an unreconstructible chain of replicas. [...] Whereas under the performative or authorial theory of origins a given sequence of works is viewed perspectively, each one with a different appearance, under the substitutional theory different objects stack up one on top of another without recession and without alteration” (30). According to Nagel and Wood, art has the capability to escape and belong to time. In fact, the principle of *substitution* implies that an image has a value that does not depend on any kind of connection with the location, interaction, and performance. The way I first used the term *substitution* had the more common meaning, in this case referring to the faithful substituting, or replacing, the sculptures with themselves. At the same time I argue that we can apply Nagel and Wood’s theory for this case as well from a conceptual point of view. In fact, while it is not possible to apply the term *substitution* to the artwork per se, considering that along with the wooden Christ real people are involved, at the same time, the celebrations of the Passion of Christ implies more than just a reenactment. These sculptures were considered as the real body of Christ, and these celebrations would become the *real* Passion of Christ with the capability to transcend the time. So while Nagel and Wood applied the concept of *substitution* to the image, I argue that we can apply the concept of *substitution* to both the images and real people for the use of wooden groups of the Descent from the Cross.

into the blood, so that to realize the mystery of the unity we may receive of him.”²⁹ At the same time, the thirteenth century saw the development of a naturalism³⁰ that particularly affected sculpture. Saint Thomas mentions Aristotle’s book on Physics, his idea of “*ars imitatur naturam*,” that involved awareness of a naturalistic representation. These concepts can be applied to other sculptural production as well, but what is relevant for the study of the wooden Descents from the Cross is that they can be considered as active catalysts of this naturalism, identification, and relationship with the art object in a broader devotional context.

The dogma of *Transubstantiation*, and later the preaching of the Mendicant orders, stressed the human side of Christ so intensely that it pushed the faithful to come closer to the body of Christ, represented by the sculpted Christ in the Descent. The position of Christ in the Descent, particularly his need to be taken down from the cross, allowed this physical union; his powerlessness and death show the peak of his humanity. The recitation of the *Laude* or other liturgical texts emotionally supplemented this physical approach. Additionally, the 1260 outbreak of the Flagellant movement in the Italian city of Perugia (**Fig 15**) also stressed the idea of

²⁹ John Shinnors, eds., *Medieval Popular Religion, 1000-1500* (Peterborough, Ont., Canada; Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 1997) 8.

³⁰ Marco Collareta, “Le Immagini e l’Arte. Riflessioni sulla Scultura Dipinta nelle Fonti Letterarie”, in *Scultura lignea: Lucca 1200-1425*. Edited by Clara Baracchini (Firenze: Studio per Edizioni Scelte, 1995), 2.

the body as a medium through which to contact Christ and seek redemption. Under the influence of these devotional events, and especially after the diffusion of the flagellant movement, the faithful started to gather in lay confraternities in which they were encouraged to imitate the life of Christ and empathize with the reenactment and celebration of the Passion of Christ.

The Descent from the Cross (**Fig 16**) reflected these devotional needs by acting as a representation of the real moment of the Descent. In fact, the group was the first step in accessing the identification that allowed for the process of substitution. This is supported by the fact that at a certain point they stopped producing other figures of the Descent from the Cross and kept only the figure of Christ that could serve the whole year as a crucified Christ. One example is the Christ from Roncione, now in the Galleria Nazionale of Perugia (**Fig 17**). This sculpture is the only character left of an original group of the Descent from the Cross. There are other examples, such as the one from Roncione³¹, that show this change to be a result of the devotional need and rituality of the period. This

³¹ There are other examples in which the only surviving figure is Christ. A complete list of these sculptures can be found in the *Riepilogo dei Gruppi Lignei Italiani di Deposizioni Supersititi* in in *La Deposizione Ligneo in Europa, L'Immagine il Culto, la Forma* ed Giovanna Saporì e Bruno Toscano. (Perugia: Electa Editori Umbri Associati, 2004), 773 -785. The *Desposed Christ*, at least for those that are in Italy can be found in: L'Aquila, Museo Nazionale d'Abruzzo, from Barga (near Lucca), Capriolo (Brescia), Cascia (Pg), Cingoli Macerata, Gubbio (Pg), Iesi (Ancona), Mercogliano (Avellino), Pisa, Prato, Recanati (Macerata) Rimini, Sansepolcro (Arezzo), San Severino Marche (Macerata) Tolentino (Macerata), Private Collection in Italy, Milano.

reduction of figures occurred because the faithful substituted themselves for the figures around Christ in the reenactment and celebration of the Passion of Christ, starting a new devotional dimension to the relationship with the art object. The wooden sculpture of the Descent from the Cross served as a catalyst of this new devotional change that affected medieval piety and its correlation with art objects. In fact, they served not only as the representation of the Descent but were in fact the center of a larger ritual that still needs to be scrutinized carefully in order to fully understand the function and the emotional impact of these sculptures.

The ritual of the Descent and the Burial of Christ, especially when considering the substitution of other characters with real people, implies a shift in the use of what we might consider *sacred space*. As I previously mentioned, in the celebrations of the burial within the Benedictine order, a cross, a host, or in some cases a sculpture was used at the specific moment of the actual burial. While the faithful were kept at distance throughout the celebration, in this specific moment they were asked to leave the church entirely. This was in respect to historical truthfulness, since only the Virgin Mary, John the Evangelist, Nicodemus, and Joseph of Arimathea were present at the moment of the burial. At the same time, it also held a political dimension: the Benedictine officiating the ritual put themselves on a different level from the faithful, indirectly reinforcing the established hierarchy.

With the use of wooden sculpture of the Descent from the Cross, this hierarchy began to change and eventually reverse. This was because the wooden Descent from the Cross's life-size dimension promoted a sense of presence and participation, or a physical identification, for the viewer. Another aspect that has been underestimated is linked to the use of the sculpture. I argued beforehand how these wooden groups were installed somewhere either inside or directly outside the church. This implies an extension of the sacred space to include the churchyard rather than just the inside of the church, which allowed direct access to the sacred scene that would become even more direct with further development of the rituals linked to the Descent from the Cross. Because of this, we can consider the Descent as a sort of indirect suggestion to participate in the scene, emotionally at first and then physically. In fact, it has been said that during the ritual of the Descent in which these sculptures were involved, a processional chant, known as *Lamentum Virginis*, was uttered.³² The *Planctus Mariae*, another song or poem related to the suffering of the Virgin Mary, could have been used along with the Deposition iconography; one

³² Bruno Toscano, Giovanna Saponi, "La Deposizione Linge: da una Mostra ad una "Summa" in *Il Teatro delle Statue: Gruppi Lignei di Deposizione e Annunciazione tra XII e XIII secolo : Atti del Convegno "Attorno ai Gruppi Lignei della Deposizione" : Milano, 15-16 Maggio 2003, Museo Diocesano Fondazione S. Ambrogio, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore*, edited by Francesca Flores D'Arcais (Milano: V&P., 2005), 15.

of the well-known examples of this is in Cividale.³³ According to analogous *Planctus*, this would have been performed during the Adoration of the Cross, and it would have been necessary to have an inanimate figure of Christ to assist with the development of the dramatic action.³⁴

The Descent from the Cross and the literature of the period

Devotional texts, which belonged to the official liturgy of the Church but were not purely authoritative, were used along with painted or sculpted images and, importantly, with the wooden groups of the Descent from the Cross. One relevant aspect of the use of these devotional texts and songs is that they used vernacular language so the faithful could understand and participate in these ceremonies. This is important because it marked the end of the clergy or monastic order performing the recital that allowed the setting and action as the only channels of access for the faithful. The text now became part of the ritual for lay people as well, providing a deeper and affective participation during ceremonies. This consequently enhanced the role of the sculptures as well, as the element that was able to combine these liturgical and performative aspects all together.

³³ Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), 512-513.

³⁴ *Ibidem.*, 513.

At first, the *laude* were just sung rather than staged or performed, but this was an important first step that provided direct access and a major active role for lay brotherhoods. It had a chief role in developing and spreading popular devotion for the Passion of Christ. While there are no documents that testify to the ways in which the wooden Descent from the Cross, the *laude*, and the *Sacre Rappresentazioni* influenced each other, it is known that they had a common geographical or chronological origin and were connected by attention to the same subject. Overall, it is clear that the liturgy of the *visitatio sepulchri* in monastic contexts, developed from previous models, was the starting point of a new devotional dimension that was elaborated through art, literature, and theater.

Only later did information exist that linked the activity of lay brotherhoods to the use of the sculpted Descent from the Cross. For example, the group of San Miniato al Tedesco belonged to the Arciconfraternita in the same city, and the Descent of the Cross group from Tivoli was taken around in procession by a member of the lay brotherhood while they sang verses of the Passion of Christ and the ‘Miserere.’”³⁵ According to Belting, the use and liturgical development of these

³⁵ Giovanni Carlo Crocchiante, *L'istoria delle Chiese della Citta' di Tivoli* (Roma: Stamperia di G. Mainardi, 1726), 42-46. On the Descent from the Cross of Tivoli see also: Géza de Francovich, “A Romanesque School of Wood Carvers in Central Italy” *The Art Bulletin* Vol 19, No. 1 (Mar., 1937) 5-57. Pierattini, Camillo. “Una Lettura del Gruppo Ligneo della Deposizione di Tivoli” in *Atti e Memorie della Società Tiburtina di Storia e Arte.* 56, (1983), 141-205.

groups could have started at the beginning of the thirteenth century in different contexts: examples of this include the *Planctus of the Virgin* or the Lamentation of Mary.³⁶ In the final part of the *Planctus Ante Nescia*, there is a strophe that can be interpreted as the physical union between Christ and the faithful, recalling the typical gesture of the Descent from the Cross:³⁷

Flete, Sion filie, tante grate gratie;
iuvenis angustie sibi sunt delicie
pro vestrīs offensīs.
In amplexu ruite, dum pendet in stipite;
mutuis amplexibus se parat amantibus
brachiis potens.³⁸

We note a symbiotic development between the literary genre related to devotion of the Passion of Christ and the use of artworks suited for this ritual, especially the Descent from the Cross. The *Laudesi della Beata Vergine Maria*, who devoted themselves to praising the Virgin Mary, were constituted in 1183, and the *Ordine dei Serviti di Maria* in 1233; both were established in the same period in

Hans Belting, *L'Arte e il Suo Pubblico*, 177.

³⁶ Belting, *L'Arte e il Suo Pubblico*, 177.

³⁷ *Ibidem.*, 177.

³⁸ "Weep, O daughters of Sion, thankful for such grace, (the hardships of the young man are for him delights) for your offences. Rush into his embraces while he hangs on the tree; with caresses given in exchange he prepares himself for his lovers with outstretched arms" as in Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), 498.

which we can chronologically locate the earliest examples of wooden Descent from the Cross. While this literary production started when these sculptures were produced (or, we can assume, vice versa) the most relevant thing to highlight is that the same *Planctus Ante Nescia* was one of the first examples that contributed to a more realistic representation of *compassio*.³⁹ This realistic representation of affective piety and participation in the Passion of Christ is strikingly similar to the aesthetic embodied by the wooden sculptures of the Descent from the Cross, in which the simple *image* of one of the moments of the Passion becomes a real presence to which the faithful were able to identify, emotionally and physically.

It has been proven that these hymns and *laude* were used for devotional purposes, however it is not clear how they were used during the celebrations of the Passion. They could have been used either in an ecclesiastical rite, in a celebration that took place in an oratory, or even during processions.⁴⁰ The most important aspect in the impossibility of fully understanding a single role of these different elements is to realize the dynamics of the religious context during the thirteenth century. The religious changes during the thirteenth century were the result of a larger spiritual context in which the Church itself, especially through the actions of

³⁹ Th. Meier, *Die Gestalt Mariens im geistlichen Schauspiel des deutschen Mittelalters* (Berlin, 1959), 153. As quoted in Belting, *L'Arte e il Suo Pubblico*, 87.

⁴⁰ Belting, *L'arte e il Suo Pubblico*, 180.

the Mendicant Orders, Franciscans, and Dominicans, wanted and elicited a more sympathetic participation with the suffering and humanity of Christ. The growth of new confraternities of *laudesi*, *disciplianti*, and *flagellants* expanded and amplified the current repertory of devotional performances such as chants, *laude*, processions, paraliturgies, and public dramatic representation.⁴¹ Simultaneously, the development of religious theater, which peaked in the thirteenth century, integrated perfectly with other devotional performances of the time.

These *laude* focused at first on the sorrow of the Virgin Mary and later also on the narration of the Passion of Christ. Physicality was always one of the peculiar traits of these *laude*, especially through the use of the *volgare*, the vernacular. They were meant to shape a devotion that was independent from the ecclesiastical institution. Since the beginning of the use of these wooden Descents from the Cross, there was a shift toward the use of *volgare* and a participation that involved the whole ritual. We see a phenomenon that moves from the official liturgy of the *Depositio Crucis* inside the church to a celebration that moves outside and away from the use of Latin and the exclusion of the faithful from the crucial moments of the celebration of the burial. The wooden Descents from the Cross are the vehicles that embodied these changes. The life-size dimensions, the likeness to Christ, the

⁴¹ Claudio Bernardi, "Theatrum Pietatis: Images, Devotion, and Lay Drama". *Mediaevalia: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Medieval Studies Worldwide*. 27 (1), 2006. 9.

coloring, and the setting all allowed the faithful to be part of the ritual. These sculptures represented the transition from liturgical didacticism to a dimension of reality and identification. The lay confraternities were actively responsible for this act of appropriation, in which the *laude* shared the action and feeling represented in these wooden Descents with the public.

Attempts to find a connection between the *laude* and the art production between the twelfth and the thirteenth century do exist.⁴² However, while interesting in their ideas and approaches, the studies are based mostly on the relationship between the *laude* and pictorial production. Pietro Scarpellini acknowledged that the pictorial production, and specifically the iconography of Christ, was the result of an elaborated process that started in Umbria, especially in Assisi, and involved not only other sources from the art world, such as influences from the French-Gothic, Byzantine, or Florentine art world, but also the new religious fervor promoted by the Franciscans.⁴³ Without a doubt, the diffusion of images anticipated the literary religious production; even if they did not influence each other directly, they might have come from a similar devotional environment. While there could have been a connection between texts and images—it is known

⁴² See Pietro Scarpellini, “Echi della Lauda nella Pittura Umbra del XII e XIV Secolo” Convegno di Studio sul Teatro Medioevale. *Le Laudi Drammatiche Umbre delle Origini: Atti*, (Viterbo: Agnesotti, 1983), 165-176.

⁴³ Scarpellini, “Echi della Lauda nella Pittura Umbra, 173.

that confraternities would sing or recite *laude* in front of painted altarpieces or frescoes—the total exclusion of sculptures when considering the development and use of *laude* in the late medieval religious context renders the argument incomplete and unconvincing.

In fact, the texts of some of the *laude* provide a description of an action that can easily be linked to either the liturgical or paraliturgical devotional act, creating a common bond for the interpretation of the Passion of Christ among writers, sculptors, and actors of *Sacre Rappresentazioni*. The passage from the *Laudario di Cortona* “*Vienne, cor mio, andiamone alla Croce!*”⁴⁴ is a clear reference to the action of going around the cross that reflects on and refers to the ritual of the Descent from the Cross. The description of the *Lauda* passed on through the *Laudari* (collection of *Laude*) from the Confraternity in Perugia added a more graphic description of the drama surrounding the death of Christ and included details that are close to the ritual of the Descent, particularly the action of Joseph of Arimathea.⁴⁵ There is John that announces the use of the ladder:

“They bring an iron ladder; maybe they want to come

⁴⁴ Piero Cudini, *Poesia Italiana del Duecento*, (Milano: Aldo Garzanti Editore, 1987), 267.

⁴⁵ Pierattini Camillo, “Una Lettura del Gruppo Ligneo della Deposizione di Tivoli” in *Atti e memorie della Società Tiburtina di Storia e d’Arte*, (56), 1983, 180.

and help you take Christ down from the Cross."⁴⁶

Then Nicodemus:

“We brought the tools,
Push all of the other people aside
And leave only those who are weeping/lamenting
Allow us the way through
So that we can take out the nails
And take Him down from the cross.”⁴⁷

The Virgin Mary answers:

“I can’t wait until that time
So that I can touch him a little
The pain in my heart is full of suffering
That the pain aches
Come, Joseph, now hurry up
And place him in my arms.”⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Piero Cudini, *Poesia Italiana del Trecento*, (Milano: Aldo Garzanti Editore, 1987), 206. Here the original text “scala portano e ferrea; forse vogliono sovvenire e a te donar sostengo e levar Iesù del legno”

⁴⁷ Ibidem., 206. “Recato avemo ei ferramenta, Onn’altra gente caccia via, Sol remanga chi lamenta, Piacciave a noie dar la via, e noi qui’ chiove mo sferramo, e della croce mo el levamo”.

⁴⁸ Ibidem., 206. “Non me par veder quill’ura, ch’un poco possa almen toccare, tanto ho el cuore pien de langura, che de dolor vorria pasmare: or, Iosep, or t’abevaccia, e pòllome fra gliei miei braccia”

Joseph of Arimathea:

“Oh Maria, now take comfort
That a nail has been removed from one hand
As if this great anguish is needed to take
You closer to the death
Take a little comfort from it
That you can be on his side and closer to him.”⁴⁹

Nicodemus:

“Oh Lord, I am not deserving
To touch you so much!
But I want to take you down from the cross
And pull out the nails
In order to comfort your mother
Because she feels so much pain
Get, oh mother, the other hand
That Nicodemus is giving you
He has been so far away from us
And now let’s enjoy his presence

⁴⁹ Ibidem., 206, “O Maria, or the conforta, ch’una mano è scavigliata; bisogno te fa como a morta, sì se’ suta angustiata, satisfatte un poco d’essa, e più a lato a luie t’apressa”.

Hug him with tenderness and be fast.”⁵⁰

The *lauda*, along with the drama’s presentation of despair at the death of Christ, carefully describes the moment of the *schiavellazione* (the moment in which Joseph of Arimathea pulls the nails out from the cross) and the moment of the Descent.

The dialogical aspect of the *lauda* carefully reflects both the ritual and the action of the wooden group of the Descent. Even if we are not certain of the connection and relationship between text and art, especially regarding the wooden Descent from the Cross, it is still possible to make fruitful assumptions. The *laude*, along with the wooden Descent from the Cross, were meant to be experienced in a collective dimension, and some elements of both imply a direct connection. In fact, the *laude* include descriptions of the action of taking Christ down from the Cross in addition to the suffering of the Virgin Mary and the dialogue between her, John the Evangelist, Nicodemus, and Joseph of Arimathea. The realistic dimension of this religious literary work entails a psychological and physical participation, and thus is similar to the Descent from the Cross.

Another similarity is the dialogical form used in the *laude* and its counterpart, the visual dialogue among the figures of the Descent. The symmetry of

⁵⁰ Ibidem., 207, “O Signore, io non so’ degno, me par, tanto de toccare! Ma pur levare d’esto legno Io te voglio sconfiggere, per consolar quista tua mate, che tante pene ci ha portate. Receve, madre, l’altra mano che già te porge Nicodemo. Tanto n’è suto lontano. Ormaie de lui ne saziemo. Lieva ei braccia e non sie lenta”.

the gestures of the characters that are part of the group of the Descent change the perception of the historical moment into a ritual act, that needs a symbolic approach,⁵¹ without the potential of expressing and embodying the idea of an action. In contrast, I argue that their potential lay in their liturgical role, in their ability to be activated by the presence of the faithful either with *laude* or other religious hymns. If the figures of the Descent from the Cross were simply a static presence, the substitution by the faithful and the replacement of the characters around the cross with real people would not have occurred. The wooden Descents from the Cross were a powerful and effective way of representing the Passion, which influenced various aspects of medieval devotion and because of their liturgical use they could have influenced the different layers of the religious society during the medieval period as well.

The exhibition and the adoration of this subject stemmed from the diffusion of icons produced in the East throughout the Italian peninsula,⁵² as the iconography was affected by Eastern artists influenced by the Crusades.⁵³ Also the ability of the Wooden Descents from the Cross to catalyze different aspects of devotion in the

⁵¹ Belting, *L'arte e il Suo Pubblico*, 170.

⁵² Carla Bino, *Dal Trionfo al Pianto: la Fondazione del Teatro della Misericordia nel Medioevo (V- XIII secolo)*, (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2008), 225.

⁵³ Marigiulia Burrelli, Antonino Caleca, "Sacre Passioni: il Cristo Deposto del Duomo di Pisa e le Deposizioni di Volterra, Vicopisano e San Miniato" in *Sacre Passioni: Scultura Lignea a Pisa dal XII al XV Secolo*, (Milano: F. Motta, 2000), 24-43.

Middle Ages, to affect the way of life, and to represent this moment of the life of Christ in a different way, must be further considered.

The potential relationship between the Descent and the *laude* is not possible to prove with certainty. Yet I believe it is still possible to assume possibilities and derive suppositions from the available data. For example, one of the most famous hymns and liturgical chants dedicated to the mourning of the Virgin Mary is the *Planctus Ante Nescia*, in which the Virgin Mary first cries about the agony of her son and implores the restitution of his body;⁵⁴ this became a reference for the later *Lamentations of Mary*. One of the characteristics of these hymns, and especially the *Planctus Ante Nescia*, was the attention given to the bodily aspect of the relationship between mother and son. According to the book of the *offici* in the cathedral of Toulouse (dated from the thirteenth century), there are instructions regarding the recitation or singing of the *Planctus* that involve covering the pulpit with white clothes in order to hide the cantors from the faithful, so that the latter would therefore be induced to cry more easily.⁵⁵ The emotional impact of the *planctus* was very effective and can be compared to the effect, although different in nature,

⁵⁴ Bino, *Dal Trionfo al Pianto*, 235.

⁵⁵ Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, vol 2, 698. "Ita Planctus dicitur in cathedra predicatorii, et debet esse coperta et circumncinta de cortinis albis praedicta cathedr ad finem, quod dicentes sive cantantes praedictum Planctum non possint videri a gentibus, nec ipsi videant gentes, ut securius possint cantare sine timore, quia forte videndo gentes turbarentur".

produced by the wooden Descents. The fact that in the Descent the Virgin Mary is represented realistically in the act of crying shows an awareness of these religious texts and the emotions that could be visualized while the texts were sung or recited.

Indeed, the *incipit* of many *laude* invites the faithful to share Mary's sorrow by highlighting her act of crying. For example, in one of the most common *laude* among the *Disciplinati*, usually sung or recited *in quinta domenica quadragesima*,⁵⁶ it says: "Come to the Cross to see my love and cry out loud my great pain."⁵⁷ The Virgin Mary's weeping was important in introducing the narration or representation of the Passion of Christ and in exposing the faithful to the drama of the moment. Along with the dimension of compassion, there was another more personal dimension, in which the Virgin Mary's crying became the model that the faithful sought to emulate in order to fully experience contrition and contemplate the martyrdom of Christ.⁵⁸

The fact that, chronologically, the Descent from the Cross anticipated the production of *laude*, and considering the connection and the similar sympathetic devotion promoted by both the wooden Descent and the *laude* themselves, I would argue that the wooden Descent from the Cross influenced the production of the *laude*.

⁵⁶ Carla Bino, *Dal Trionfo al Pianto*, 396. Trans: "Venite alla croce a vedere il mi'amore e piangeti ad alta voce il mio gran dolore."

⁵⁷ *Ibidem.*, 396.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem.*, 398.

During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the artistic pictorial production of the Crucifixion of Christ, and especially the representation of the Virgin Mary crying at the bottom of painted crosses (**Fig 18**), enabled the development of the theme of the *Compassio*. Along with the contemplation of the death of Christ, this theme added the additional emotional element of the universal human suffering of the Virgin Mary losing her son.⁵⁹ The pictorial representation of the Crucifixion has been used as a direct and reciprocal reference for literary production, and for the understanding and development of the popular devotion toward the Virgin Mary. Without a doubt, the painted cross had a substantial and important role, considering its mass diffusion especially around the center of Italy.

While the theme of the *Compassio* started to spread around the tenth and eleventh centuries, it was not until the diffusion of *laude* and the *Sacre Rappresentazioni* that the role of the Virgin Mary became more prominent and central along with Christ's position.⁶⁰ Both *Sacre Rappresentazioni* and *laude* developed chronologically after the diffusion of the wooden Descent from the Cross, and they share an important aspect. All three of these sacred art works contain a

⁵⁹ Sticca Sandro, *The Planctus Mariae in the Dramatic Tradition of the Middle Ages*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 119-120.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem.*, 121.

dimension that combines theatrical representation, liturgy, and devotional drama.⁶¹ In this process of development, I believe that the wooden Descents from the Cross held a pivotal role in affecting the *Sacre Rappresentazioni* and the *laude*, and became a sort of a turning point of devotion during the Medieval period.

Particularly during the tenth and eleventh-century diffusion of the sculpted wooden crosses, there is a passage from the hieratical dimension of the liturgy to the introduction of the real presence of Christ.⁶² The wooden Descent from the Cross allowed the drama to become part of everyday life, making it accessible to the faithful and demanding that they empathize on a level beyond remembrance and contemplation. Instead, it gave them the opportunity to see, to hear, to participate, and to become fully part of the scene. The wooden group embodies the presence and spurs the identification that enables responsible participation. The wooden Descent not only displays the truth, but also represents the truth. During the tenth and eleventh centuries, the wooden sculptures, and sculptures in general, contained the host to justify the production, use, and display of these objects. However, the wooden Descent from the Cross instead represents an action, and the presence of a

⁶¹ Claudio Bernardi "Deposizioni e Annunciazioni", 80.

⁶² Bino Carla, "Lo Spettacolo del Dolore e il Teatro della Misericordia" in *Atti del Convegno "Sacre Rappresentazioni – Arte, Etica, Vangelo delle Comunità" di Gubbio 9-10 aprile 2010/Cantiano 11 aprile 2010*, 133. <http://www.laturbacantiano.it/oltre-i-palchi/102-gubbio-2010.html>

group of people other than just Christ, the Virgin Mary, and John the Evangelist. The sculptures represent real people; they are not reliquaries. Angels are also occasionally represented, but their smaller size in comparison to the other figures adds a miraculous and otherworldly dimension to the earthly moment and action, with the same physicality and presence expressed by the other figures.

As I mentioned before, the setting and the use of the wooden Descent from the Cross sanctioned access to the sacred scene and allowed the faithful to experience a moment of the Passion in person. Slowly, after the establishment of these sculptures and their utilization in celebrations outside the church and the official liturgy, the sculptures stopped being produced, particularly the figures around Christ. Some argue that this occurred because they went out of fashion according to the devotional needs of the period; however, I believe that the sculptures instead created the scenario in which the *Sacre Rappresentazioni* developed, in which real actors along with simulacra performed scenes from the Passion of Christ. The *Sacre Rappresentazioni* followed the devotional aspect established by the use of the wooden Descent, and they became independent simply by developing the existing functions of the latter. While no contemporary documents can confirm this suggested transition, it is supported by the development of devotional aspects in the Middle Ages, particularly the use of

sculptures in the *Sacre Rappresentazioni* of the Assumption of Mary, the Ascension of Christ, and in the Annunciation during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.⁶³

Similar to the *Sacre Rappresentazioni*, the *laude* originated from the *lamentatio Virginis* and developed chronologically after the production and use of the wooden Descent from the Cross. Two of the main features of the *laude* were the detailed description of the torture of Christ and the maternal suffering of the Virgin Mary. This attention to the suffering of the Virgin Mary and the earthly maternal role she held, along with the description of the distressed body of Christ, does not stem from the Gospel accounts of the Passion. If we examine the exegetical tradition of the New Testament, the accounts that commented on the Passion of Christ did not add anything new, but instead furthered a sober interpretation of the moment.⁶⁴

The changes that accompany the *laude* do not affect the iconography of these moments, but rather the way the faithful experienced them. The dialogical structure of the *laude* implies a different interaction with the text, and consequently with the scene itself in which the faithful participated. Another aspect that is particular to the

⁶³ Michele Bacci, "Le Sculture Lignee nel Folklore Religioso: Alcune Considerazioni" in *Scultura Lignea: Lucca 1200-1425*, edited by Clara Baracchini (Firenze: Studio per Edizioni Scelte, 1995), 35. Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), Vol II, 245 and 479-480.

⁶⁴ Bino Carla, "Lo Spettacolo del Dolore e il Teatro della Misericordia" in *Atti del Convegno "SACRE RAPPRESENTAZIONI – Arte, Etica, Vangelo delle Comunità" di Gubbio 9-10 aprile 2010/Cantiano 11 aprile 2010*, 134. <http://www.laturbacantiano.it/oltre-i-palchi/102-gubbio-2010.html>.

laude is the strong physical relationship between the Virgin Mary and her Son. The life-size dimensions, the naturalistic depiction, and the representation of the Virgin Mary in the act of holding Christ's hand as he is detached from the cross provide access to the humanity of Christ and the drama of the Virgin Mary.

Mimesis of the figure of Christ has always been a primary aspect of Christianity, though the Bible's true meaning of "to imitate" or "to follow" is unclear.⁶⁵ Additionally, the representation of Christ has changed throughout time according to the church's message and devotional needs. It is during the twelfth century that the idea of imitating Christ became a significant part of late medieval spirituality. The Descent from the Cross and its liturgical use rendered the scene an occasion to experience an intense emotion as a participant rather than just a spectator. This relationship between the art object and its use in liturgical and paraliturgical functions further stressed a connection with the human side of Christ and the motherly role of the Virgin Mary. The *laude* developed and enhanced the relationship between the sculptures of the Descent and the faithful. The dialogical structure of the *laude* generated a further sense of action among the sculptures and a direct dialogue with the faithful. However, this would not have been possible without the creation and use of wooden sculptures that allowed

⁶⁵ Giles Constable, *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought*. (New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 145.

access to the sacred that was previously protected by the clergy and the religious orders.

One of the most famous authors of *laude* is the Franciscan Jacopone da Todi. From a formal and technical point of view, his *laude* are not different from those used by confraternities during the celebrations of the Passion of Christ, but his use of language elevated his production into a poetical dimension widely recognized by scholars.⁶⁶ The core of his spirituality lies in the mystical relationship with the divine, especially with the humanity of Christ through the mystery of the death and incarnation, and the suffering of the Virgin Mary.⁶⁷ In his famous *Stabat Mater*,⁶⁸ despite the mystical and intimate hymn, there is a section in which the person assisting the scene invokes the Virgin Mary in order to suffer the same affliction she endures, as well as a desire to die with Christ on the cross.⁶⁹

At the Cross her station keeping, / stood the mournful Mother weeping, / close to
Jesus to the last. Through her heart, His sorrow sharing, / all His bitter anguish
bearing, / now at length the sword has passed. / O thou Mother! fount of love! /

⁶⁶ Lino Leonardi, "L'Opera di Jacopone da Todi" in *Iacopone da Todi e l'Arte in Umbria nel Duecento* (Milano: Skira, 2006), 39.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem.*, 41.

⁶⁸ Even today it is not known if the hymn was written by Jacopone da Todi or Saint Bonaventura. R. Bettarini "Iacopone da Todi e le Laude" in *Antologia della Poesia Italiana* vol I, (Torino: Einaudi, 1997), 283.

⁶⁹ Lucia Battaglia Ricci, "Ad Exercitandum Devotionis Affectum. Gli Scritti e le Immagini Sacre" in *Sacre Passioni: Scultura Ligne a Pisa dal XII al XV Secolo*, (Milano: F. Motta, 2000), 20.

Touch my spirit from above, / make my heart with thine accord: / Holy Mother!
pierce me through, / in my heart each wound renew / of my Savior crucified:
Let me, to my latest breath, / Wounded with His every wound, / steep my soul till it
hath swooned, / in His very Blood away; / Be to me, O Virgin, nigh.⁷⁰

The religious text *Meditationes Vitae Christi* (Meditations on the Life of Christ) was written at the beginning of the fourteenth century by the Franciscan Giovanni de Caulibus. Previously attributed to Saint Bonaventura, it was an extremely popular devotional text. It invented new scenes of the Passion of Christ and provided a development of the canonical account related to the Passion.⁷¹ The *Meditationes* were written in a way that produced an affective impact on the reader, stressing the urgency and drama of the moment rather than a strictly accurate theology.⁷² The affective impact is crucial particularly when describing the grief of the Virgin Mary at the moment of the deposition from the cross: “Tunc pendentem

⁷⁰ Franco Sacchetti, and Alberto Chiari, *Il Libro delle Rime* (Bari: G. Laterza & figli, 1936), CCXLVII 1, 294-195.

Original Latin Text:

Stabat Mater dolorosa / iuxta cruce lacrimosa, / dum pendebat Filius.

Cuius animam gementem, / contristatam et dolentem / pertransivit gladius.

Eia, Mater, fons amoris / me sentire vim doloris / fac, ut tecum lugeam.

Sancta Mater, istud agas, / crucifixi fige plagas / cordi meo valide.

Fac, ut portem Christi mortem,

Fac me plagis vulnerari, / fac me Cruce inebriari, / et cruore Filii

Flammis ne urar succensus,

⁷¹ Sticca Sandro, *The Planctus Mariae*, 123.

⁷² Ibidem., 124.

manum dexteram Domina suscepit reverenter, et ponit ad vultum suum, intuetur, et osculatur cum lacrymis validis et suspires doloris. Evulso autem clavo pedum, paulisper descendit Joseph, et omnes accipiunt corpus Domini, et ponunt in terram. Domina suscipit caput cum scapulis in gremio suo."⁷³

The written description follows the action of taking Christ down from the cross, and in this aspect might not vary widely from its counterpart in painting. What does change, however, is the intention of capturing the human dimension of the moment in order to create access to the sacred scene through a participation in and sharing of the drama. One characteristic that is pivotal to these *Meditationes* is the physicality of the feelings that would not have been conceptually possible without the creation of and ritual around the wooden Descent from the Cross.

The wooden Descent from the Cross offers a true and physical access to the scene as well as a spiritual dimension. The *Meditationes*, which did not refer to any of the parables, offered a diverse account of the Passion from the Gospels by adding new scenes. Since these elements lie outside the official narrative of the Gospels, the *Meditationes* reflect the way the wooden Descent from the Cross was part of both

⁷³ A.C. Peltier, *S. Bonaventurae Meditationes Vitae Christi*, in *Opera Omnia*, 14 Vol. (Parisiis, 1868), II, 609. As quoted in Sticca, *The Planctus Mariae*, 124. Translation: "Then she received with reverence the right hand of Christ, and put it close to her face, and looked at it, and kiss it with heavy tears, sighing with pain. Once he pulled out the nail from the foot, Joseph passed down the body and everybody took the body of Christ, and they put it on the ground. The Virgin embraced his head and shoulder in her lap."

liturgical and extraliturgical rituals, while creating a predominantly physical and emotional dimension to devotion. We cannot know for certain that the *Meditationes* and the *laude* were directly inspired by the wooden Descents from the Cross, but considering their context, the extant sculptures, and information we are able to gather thus far, we must be aware of possible connections between literary production and the wooden Descent from the Cross.

Both sculpture and painting had pivotal functions in promoting affective piety in a medieval culture that relied heavily on images. Images were generally made to correspond to the mood of the faithful, and they supposedly had the function to arouse a devotional mood.⁷⁴ According to Hans Belting, there was a reciprocal relationship between the painted image and the beholder, in which the beholder tried to emulate the person represented in the depicted image while simultaneously observing the same truthfulness in the image that he, as a person, possessed.⁷⁵ This dialogue between the image and the beholder had a central function in shaping devotion and educating the faithful toward an affective piety. However, comparing the devotional relationship the beholder had with a painted image to that maintained with a sculpture complicates this dialogical relationship. In fact, the devotional images appealed to the viewer and promoted a personal

⁷⁴ Hans Belting, *L'Arte e il Suo Pubblico*, 66-67.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem.*, 66.

dialogue. While this kind of relationship between the beholder and the painted image was real and effective, we must consider how it compares to the realism the faithful experienced in a ritual that utilized wooden sculptures.

Scholarship often utilizes the devotional and aesthetic roles of painting, literature, or the life of the Saints to include and refer to the existence and use of wooden sculptures without fully analyzing their cultic function and the way they affected piety. The association of wooden sculptures with the confraternities relegates this artistic production to popular piety and empties them of any theological or high devotional meaning. This idea strips them of any effective role in influencing devotion during the thirteenth century. However, the wooden Descent from the Cross and their use in rituals had a significant function that influenced the devotion and art during the thirteenth century and into the Renaissance.

While it may be true that a relationship existed between the lay confraternities and the devotional use of the wooden Descents from the Cross, we need to be aware that these sculptures were being produced far before the development of the lay confraternities. Thus, while the confraternities may have used and relied on these sculptures to celebrate their rituals, they simply absorbed the liturgy, the ceremony, and, above all, the understanding of the potential of the

artworks that most likely developed at the beginning of the thirteenth century, and possibly even before.

The way these sculptures were made produced a new way of interacting with the art object, and set a standard that allowed confraternities to access the sacred later in the century. The *laude*, which contributed greatly to characterizing thirteenth-century devotion with a heavy emphasis on the humanity of Christ and the sorrow of the Virgin Mary, developed after the diffusion of the wooden Descent from the Cross. The *Meditationes vitae Christi*, which came after the development of the wooden Descent, emphasized aspects of the Passion of Christ that relied on emotional and concrete details, but without following the canon of the Gospels. The *Meditationes* further develop the main intention of the sculptures: to provide a realistic moment in which imitation is replaced by action, participation, and identification.

Extant examples of the Descent have been found not only inside convents and churches linked to the Benedictine order, but also in Cathedral and parish churches. Thus, while these sculptures could have been developed and used in a Benedictine environment, they also assumed an important civic role as a point of reference for the whole community (seen in their liturgical role in the *Sacre Rappresentazioni* and their association with society). The *planctus* that affected the

production of *laude* had the same emotional result of arousing devotional feeling as the sculpted Descent from the Cross. The use of the group of the Descent was also linked during the Holy Week to church Cathedrals, and its origin was more closely related to the Canons Regulars than to a monastic order. As a consequence, the wooden groups of the Descents became more open to the community. These aspects support the independence of the wooden Descent from the Cross from a mere monastic order and acknowledge its ability to become the religious symbol and community access to the sacred. In becoming the access point to the sacred and the humanity of Christ in a ritual that was for the laity and directly involved the laity, the Descent also affected and set a sort of a paradigm for Franciscan piety as well.⁷⁶

This suggests that the wooden Descent from the Cross needs to be seen as an active agent that was able to change and polarize the devotional behavior of the late Medieval period. The wooden groups of the Descent were not simple devotional objects used during specific liturgy or in other paraliturgical circumstances; they were the primary factor that affected piety and promoted this new relationship with Christ and the scene of the Passion. This created other elements, such as the

⁷⁶ I will discuss and articulate more about the relationship between Franciscans and sculpture later in this study. The idea is to trace the liturgical use of wooden Descent from the Cross to some aspects of the Franciscan piety and their use of wooden animated sculptures of Christ during the celebrations of the Holy Week, and more generally to revise the relationship that Franciscans had with sculpture and its use for liturgical and religious purposes.

compositions of the *laude*, the development of the *Sacre Rappresentazioni* (which affected religious theater as well), and a sympathetic devotion, which interacted directly with these sculptures and thus amplified their sacred role while also remaining emotionally moving and physically accessible. Thus we must consider the Descent from the Cross not just as a devotional object, but as an active medium and the final result of other aspects of medieval religious society.

Chapter 3

The sculpture as the body of Christ

Although it is believed that the production of wooden sculptures of the Descent from the Cross ceased in the thirteenth century, their complexity did not end there. One can identify a progression from the monumental Depositions featuring all the characters to the single sculpture of Christ that has specific structural features which began to be produced around this time. These wooden sculptures of the Crucified Christ were made in such a way that it was possible to move the arms, typically by the clergy or believers, to facilitate easier use in the ritual of the Descent from the Cross, and this provided a change from a symbolic reenactment to a realistic one. Art historians refer to them as *Crucifixes with movable arms*.

My intention in this study, and more specifically in this chapter, is to expand and revise our understandings of devotion and connection with the sacred contemporaneous with the statues usage in the Middle Ages and to examine the sculptures' shifting relationship with the pictorial medium in the delicate passage from the Medieval period to the Renaissance. In addition, other studies that involved the animated sculptures of Christ, or again, even the Descent from the Cross, focus primarily on iconography and style. If the role of of the statues' mobile function in

ceremonial contexts is mentioned, it is relegated solely to the realm of the devotion as strictly connected to the rituals of the Holy Week.

I believe that in order to fully comprehend the importance of these objects, we need to go beyond the stylistic features and the fact of materiality, per se. Rather, we need to also focus on the agency that these objects had for the faithful and the religious society of the period in the experience of the sacred. Study on the subject portrays these kinds of sculptures in terms of devotional objects utilized for liturgical reasons (as occurred in the Descent from the Cross) and as a sort of appendix for the understanding of the two-dimensional representation of Christ (as in manuscripts, painted wood, or frescoes).¹

Where these objects are concerned, there is a singular need to consider them within a wider context and to map out a more complex relationship between the statues and the different facets of the religious society in which they were immersed. The most numerous extant examples of animated sculptures of the crucified Christ have been found in Italy. The oldest surviving sculptures were made in the first half of the fourteenth century, and they were mostly used in liturgical and paraliturgical performances organized either inside or outside the church.² These new sculptures of the animated Crucified Christ, particularly those that had

¹ Tanya Jung, *The Phenomenal Lives*, 28.

² Elvio Lunghi, *La Passione degli Umbri: Crocifissi in Legno in Valle Umbra tra Medioevo e Rinascimento* (Foligno: Edizioni Orfini Numeister, 2000) 107.

arms which could be moved, were more versatile for the liturgical drama of the *Depositio* and especially for the moment of the entombment, during which the sculpture was usually laid into a representation of the holy sepulcher or a space that symbolically represented the sepulcher.

It has been mentioned that the groups of the Descent from the Cross found in cathedrals, Pieves, and Benedictine abbeys were not suitable for conducting the liturgical drama of the *Depositio*, especially after the dramatization of the scene along with the introduction of a dynamic representation of it and not just the presentation.³ According to Hans Belting, the group of the Descent was just a paradigm of the Passion that was not able to keep up with the devotional change of the thirteenth century after the passage from the symbolic interpretation and relationship with the Passion to a more personal and intimate participation.⁴ Conversely, I argue that the groups of the Descent from the Cross played an active role in shaping the devotion in the Medieval period, and it was not just a symbolic role. Without a doubt, the groups of the Descent from the Cross were at first an independent group of sculptures that changed over time in accordance with rituality and devotional needs. They were distinct from the animated sculptures of the Crucified Christ categorized by Kopania. However, the wooden Descents from the

³ Hans Belting, and Giorgio Cusatelli, *L'Arte e il Suo Pubblico: Funzione e Forme delle Antiche Immagini della Passione* (Bologna: Nuova Alfa editorial, 1986) 183-184.

⁴ *Ibidem.*, 183-184.

Cross are where the animated sculptures of the Crucified Christ originated, both physically and conceptually.

Though the group of the Descents could not guarantee a dynamic and realistic performance of the ritual of the *Depositio* and the Entombment, I believe it would be more productive to identify the important connections between the wooden group of the Descents and the Animated Sculptures of the Crucified Christ, rather than simply underlining the inability of the Descents to adapt themselves to the devotional changes of the thirteenth century. Other scholars have mentioned that there is a connection between the group of the Descent and the single figure of the animated sculpture of Christ and noted how the group of the Descent anticipated the production of the animated figure of the crucified Christ.⁵

Specifically, the adaptation and changes that these sculptures underwent was the substitution of real people for the characters of these groups, such as the Virgin Mary, John the Evangelist, Nicodemus, and Joseph of Arimathea. More significantly, because of their size and likeness, the sculptures provided physical access to the sacred scene. These sculptures and their liturgical uses initiated what we can discuss as a means of access to the sacred that involved both the body of Christ and the concretization of the sacred space. On a deeper level, they also represent a new

⁵ Bernd Schällicke, *Die Ikonographie der Monumentalen Kreuzabnahmegruppen des Mittelalters in Spanien* (Diss. FU Berlin, 1975), 68-69. As quoted as well in Kopania, *Animated Sculptures*, 151.

understanding of and means of representing the body, which, as I will examine later in this chapter, will affect the Renaissance as well.

The fact that the use of these sculptures was also connected to the activities of lay confraternities that developed most notably during the thirteenth century demonstrates that this use and experience of the sculpture was not confined to the realm of the symbol.⁶ These religious confraternities sung the *laude* in front of these images and these performances often acquired a theatrical dimension with dramatic effect. In some cases members had specific roles and became actors, substituting themselves for the characters of the wooden group of the Descents. Since the beginning, these sculptures had a scenic and narrative role that involved action, as opposed to simply constituting a *sacred image*.⁷

This is the most important moment in, and the most interesting outcome of, using the wooden Descent from the Cross to change ways of living the devotion and participating in the Passion of Christ. Obviously, there are other elements that contributed to these changes that will be objects of discussion later in this chapter, but the starting point, the door of access into the sacred, were these sculptures. Once the faithful substituted themselves for the sculptures in the celebrations and reenactment of the moments of the Passion of Christ, we begin to witness the

⁶ Kopania, *Animated Sculptures*, 151.

⁷ Michele Bacci, "Le sculture lignee nel folklore religioso: alcune considerazioni" in *Scultura Lignea: Lucca 1200-1425* (Firenze: Studio per edizioni scelte), 34-35.

passage of adaptation from the sculpture of the Deposed Christ to the more dynamic version: the animated sculpture of the Crucified Christ.

Indeed, some sculptures of Christ from Descent were modified in order to fulfill and adapt the image to the ceremony. These sculptures of Christ were altered, and the arms were modified in order to be functional for the ritual of the *Depositio* or at least so that they could be used in different moments of the celebrations of the Passion of Christ during the Holy Week. The oldest example in this modification is the Christ from the Umbrian city of Cascia, dated at the beginning of the fourteenth century. **(Fig 1)**. After an attentive campaign of restoration, it was realized that this sculpture was not actually one of the earliest examples of the animated sculpture of Christ, but, rather, a modified sculpture which had originally belonged to a group of the Descent.⁸ Another example that provides evidence of this is the sculpture from the cathedral church of Tolentino **(Fig 2)**, which was transformed from a Crucified Christ to a Deposed and, eventually, into a Dead Christ. The sculpture is dated around the second half of the thirteenth century, and while we do not know when the original structure was altered, we know that after the restoration in 1992-1994

⁸ Elvio Lunghi, "Cascia (Perugia) Museo di Palazzo Santi Deposto" in *La Deposizione Ligneo in Europa: l'Immagine, il Culto, la Forma*, edited by Saporì, Giovanna, and Bruno Toscano. (Milan: Electa, 2004), 276. Lunghi *La Passione degli Umbri*, 107.

the sculpture was reinstated as the representation of Christ that follows the iconography of the Descent from the Cross.⁹

There is also a definitive moment in this passage between states in which the main character was still a stationary sculpture, but living people acted the other parts.¹⁰ The passage from the group of the Descent to the creation of independent sculptures of the animated Crucified Christ, especially since the beginning of the fourteenth century, shows above all the combination of the theatrical aspects of the liturgy and the celebrations of the Passion of Christ with the utilization of a devotional object that embodied a sacred aura.¹¹ These animated sculptures of Christ embodied this process of appropriation of the sacred and reflected the needs of the devotional society of the late Medieval period. At the same time they have more significance to consider in terms of what they reveal about new ways of experiencing artwork and the idea of the body, in a way that affected the making of art more generally in the Late Medieval period and early Renaissance art.

The use and functionality of the sculptures of the animated Crucified Christ for devotional purposes attracted the attention of scholarship, leaving the

⁹ Bruno Bruni, "Tolentino (Macerata), Cattedrale di San Catervo, *Deposto*" in *La Deposizione Ligneo in Europa: l'Immagine, il Culto, la Forma*, edited by Saporì, Giovanna, and Bruno Toscano. (Milan: Electa, 2004), 219. The sculpture was modified at the beginning of the twentieth century by the local Confraternity of the Dead Christ in order to be utilized during the rituals of the Holy Week.

¹⁰ Carletti, L., and C. Giometti. "Medieval Wood Sculpture And Its Setting In Architecture: Studies In Some Churches In and Around Pisa." *Architectural History*, (46) 20 03, 37-56.

¹¹ Claudio Bernardi, "La Deposizione di Cristo nei Teatri della Pietà" in *Sacre Passioni: Scultura Ligneo a Pisa dal XII al XV Secolo*. edited by Mariagiulia Burresti (Milano: F. Motta, 2000), 17.

sculptures unexamined within the traditional canon of art history. Often, they were considered as the consequence of something else and depicted as having a passive role, rather than as playing an active role in shaping devotion and art.

During the medieval period, along with their didactic role, devotional images allowed the faithful an access to the divine. The sculptures are thought to have played the same role, but their usage suggests that they had acquired a different status. This is particularly significant in the case of animated sculptures of the crucified Christ.

Already, the presence and purpose of the Descent from the Cross compositions attracted the attention of the faithful not only toward the single moment of the deposition of Christ, being just the symbol of it, but also enabled an access to the sacred, the sacred space, and especially to a materially real dimension of the sacred, which the faithful themselves were part of. This was a process of emanation that promoted an atmosphere of both awe and of involvement.

This process of incorporation of the faithful did not cease when the Descents from the Cross ceased to be produced. Rather, it continued with the diffusion of the animated sculptures of the Crucified Christ. Obviously, the relationship to the artwork and the consequences of this relation, in terms of access to the sacred, were related to, yet distinct from, those involved in the Descent.

These later works' concentration on a single figure, rather than on a group of sculptures, indicates that the focus of the attention was specifically Christ and his body. Following in the tradition of the Descent from the Cross, the animated sculptures of the Crucified Christ were life-sized and thus more plausible in order to identify as and personify the body of Christ.

As with the Descent from the Cross, the animated sculptures of the Crucified Christ were utilized either in liturgical or paraliturgical rituals, which shows the complexity of these artworks and their ability to perform in different contexts, despite a dependence upon and closeness to one another. Scholars have already addressed, to the extent that drawing exclusively upon documentation allows, the use of the images in liturgical drama.¹² I argue that this approach is inadequate to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the use of the animated sculptures of the Crucified Christ, as there are other pertinent elements to consider. In this chapter, I will detail other relevant factors which affected visual culture and practices of devotion of the period in Italy.

¹² C.F. Kopania, 120-157, Lunghi *La Passione degli Umbri*, 113-132. Claudio Bernardi, *La Drammaturgia della Settimana Santa in Italia*, 2005, Gesine and Johannes Taubert, *Mittelalterliche Kruzifixe*, 1969.

Lay Confraternities and the laicization of the sacred

Toward the end of the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth century there is an increase and diffusion of lay confraternities. It is around 1215 that there was a risen the number of groups of faithful classified as *penitenti*, and this was referred as the *movimento della Penitenza del Duecento*.¹³ Before 1221 they started to gather in local confraternities and were influenced essentially by the life of Saint Francis, when he was living as *Friar of Penance* before founding the mendicant order of the Franciscans.¹⁴ In Perugia in 1260 there was also the outbreak of the *Flagellanti*, by the friar Raniero Fasani, who was able to obtain fifteen days in which the faithful were exempted from work in order to dedicate themselves to the practice of penance.¹⁵ Fra Raniero Fasani urged the faithful to participate in the sorrow that Christ underwent during his Passion, and accordingly flagellation was the medium to experience the same suffering as Christ.¹⁶ The purpose of my work is not to provide a survey of the extensive literature on lay

¹³ Gilles Messerman "Disciplinati e Penitenti nel Duecento" in *Il Movimento dei Disciplinati nel Settimo Centenario dal suo Inizio (Perugia, 1260); convegno internazionale: Perugia, 25-28 settembre 1960*, (Spoleto: Arti grafiche Panetto & Petrelli, 1962), 45.

¹⁴ Ibidem, 46.

¹⁵ Ansidei, Vincenzo, *Regestum Reformationum Comunis Perusii ab Anno 1256 ad Annum 1300 1. 1.* (Perugia: Deputazione di Storia Patria dell'Umbria, 1935), 180. "Prop 1. Cum ipse potestas sit requisites a quibusdam religiosis, et specialiter a frater Raynerio, indicare ferias propter utilitate Devotionis, que fit comuniter in...civitate et comitatu Perusie, si placet...quod ferie indicantur hinc ad quindecim dies, salvo quod...non interdatur officium sindicorum et quod quilibet possit petere alimenta". Messerman., 47.

¹⁶ Meersseman, 47.

confraternities and their diffusion during the Late Medieval period; however, I would like to underline some aspects of these phenomena as they relate to my arguments.

The diffusion of these confraternities contributed to the laicization of the access of the sacred and concentration on the body as a medium through which redemption could be sought. The same process is observable in the rituality characterizing the passage from the Descent from the Cross to the animated sculpture of the Crucified Christ. The body of Christ, embodied in this case by wooden animated sculptures, seems to mirror the specific needs of the faith and faithful entailed by these shifts. The change of the rituality and use of these sculptures reflected these spiritual and religious needs as well.

Among those documents found regarding the use and existence of animated sculptures of Christ, the oldest are the *laude* records found in the codex 36/4, kept at the San Rufino Cathedral in Assisi (known also as *l'illuminati* – dated no later than the end of the fourteenth century). This was a *lauda* or the celebration of the Holy Friday enacted by the confraternity of Santo Stefano (*disciplinati di Santo Stefano*) that involved the ritual of the *scavigliazione*, that is the staging of the ritual of the *Depositio*. The incipit of this *lauda* says: “Ista dicitur in die Veneris sancti propter

scavigliationem Domini nostril Iesu Christi".¹⁷ The fact that it explicitly mentions the ritual of the *scavigliazione* (literally pulling out the nails from the cross – Descent from the Cross) implies the use of an animated sculpture of Christ that most likely, in this case, had movable arms, so that it was able to be moved from a crucified Christ and function as dead Christ. This rite is still happening today in the Cathedral of San Rufino in Assisi, and while today's drama is the result of a slow and continuous transformation from the original version, at the same time the referring text is still the same that comes from the Confraternity of Santo Stefano in Assisi from the thirteenth century. This celebration had the function to *representare*, which means represent, make present, and to emulate and participate as well.¹⁸

While people from the confraternities or actors played the part of other characters during the ritual there are no signs that Christ was played by a real person, so it is implied that the role was occupied by an image, and most likely a sculpture.

In the text itself there are no parts assigned to Christ, so one may infer the use of a sculpture from the fact that he did not need to speak. In fact, during the evening of Maundy Thursday in the Cathedral of San Rufino in Assisi, a wooden

¹⁷ Archivio Capitolare di San Rufino di Assisi. Full text of the *lauda* in Francesco Santucci, "Lauda della Scavigliazione della Fraternita dei Disciplinati di S. Stefano. Translation: "This is said (played/read) in the day of the Holy Friday for the rite of "Scavigliazione" of our Lord Jesus Christ". di Assisi." Atti Accademia Properziana del Subasio ser. 6, n. 22 (1994), pp. 243-63.

¹⁸ Paola Mercurelli Salari, "Il Rito della *Scavigliazione* nella tradizione di Assisi" in *Il Rito della Scavigliazione nella Cattedrale di Assisi* (Editrice Minerva, Assisi, 2006), 15.

animated sculpture of the Crucified Christ is used for the rite of the *Scavigliazione* **(Fig 3)**. This was also reiterated by the written constitution of the *Fraternita di Nostro Signore Gesù Cristo Crocifisso di Santo Stefano*, to which the *laudario* belonged, which states that it was mandatory to perform the *laude* dedicated to the Passion of Christ in a public space on the morning of Holy Friday.¹⁹

The same kind of ritual of the *Deposition* existed in Perugia as well, and this is shown by the similarities between the *lauda* in Assisi, the one in Perugia, and more precisely the *lauda* LXII of the confraternity of Sant'Andrea, dated 1374. Other documents mention the use of crucifixes utilized during the devotions for Holy Friday, and they were found in the inventory of the various confraternities in Perugia.²⁰ For example, in documents that belonged to the San Domenico Oratory, dated 1339, there is information about: "*una croce e Colonna de la Devotione [...] tre chiuove torte dai crocifixo [...] uno crocifixo grande acto a fare la Devotione*"²¹

Where the Confraternity of Santo Stefano is concerned, there are also registers attesting that the confraternity bought the wood necessary to make a

¹⁹ Angela Maria Terruggia, "In quale Momento i Disciplinati hanno dato Origine al loro Teatro?" in *Il Movimento dei Disciplinati nel Settimo Centenario dal suo Inizio (Perugia, 1260); Convegno Internazionale: Perugia, 25-28 Settembre 1960*, (Spoleto: Arti grafiche Panetto & Petrelli, 1962), 438. See note 2: this information comes from the Capitolo VIII of the Costituzione della Fraternita di Santo Stefano: Assisi, Archivio Capitolare di San Rufino, ms 78, f. 6v., copy of the original Statuti of the 23 August 1327.

²⁰ Lunghi, *La Passione degli Umbri*, 124.

²¹ Lunghi, *La passione degli Umbri*, 124. Kopania, *Animated Sculptures*, 48. Translation: "One cross and column for the Devotion [...] three nails pulled from the crucifix [...] one big crucifix suitable for the Devotion"

Crucifix in the city of Bettona in June 1338. The document also mentions that the confraternity paid the sculptor Pietruccio di Picziche or Picziche: "In the same way he spent five coins when he went to the city of Bitonto for the sculpted crucified Christ. In the same way he paid for the making of the sculpted crucifix to Petruccio di Pizzica and for two crowns and three wings of angels the amount of eight libre and thirteen coins."²²

Other significant information on the existence and use of wooden sculptures during the rituals of the Holy Week comes from the city of Foligno in Umbria. We know that, at least during the fifteenth century, the celebrations of the Holy Friday were able to involve the whole city and were divided into the preaching, the procession, and the *sacra rappresentazione* (Passion Play).²³ The preaching usually took place in the morning, the procession early in the afternoon, and the *sacra rappresentazione* after sunset.

This order changed during the following century, when the preaching component was moved to the afternoon, after the procession and before the *sacra rappresentazione*.²⁴ There is little information available about the procession prior

²² Cesare Cenci, *Documentazione di Vita Assisana, 1300-1530, Volumes 1-3* (Editiones Collegii S. Bonaventurae ad Claras Aquas, 1975), Vol 1, 76. Cited after Lunghi, *La Passione degli Umbri*, 124. Kopania, *Animated Sculptures*, 48. "Item, expendit quando misit in civitatem Bictonii pro lingno crucifixi sculti, quinque sol. Item, solvit pro facture dicti crucifixi Petrutio Picçiche et pro duabus coronis et III alis angelorum et agutis, in summa VIII lib. et XIII sol."

²³ Mario Sensi, "Fraternite Disciplinate e Sacre Rappresentazioni a Foligno nel secolo XV" in *Bollettino della Deputazione di Storia Patria per l'Umbria*, Vol 71, n. 2 (1974), 147.

²⁴ *Ibidem.*, 148.

to the fifteenth century, but according to the register of the revenues and expenditures of the Confraternity of San Feliciano, we know of the grandiosity of and high participation in this kind of procession.²⁵ After the procession there was the *sacra rappresentazione*, and about halfway through the fifteenth century the confraternity of San Feliciano and that of the Trinity performed the *sacra rappresentazione* in their own oratory.²⁶ More specifically, in relation to the animated sculptures of the crucified Christ, there is a document from the inventory of the confraternity of San Feliciano dated 1425 in which there is a direct reference to the *sacra rappresentazione* and the ritual of the Descent from the Cross:

“Devozioni ‘de tempore’ espressamente ricordate nell’inventario del 1425 sono: la devozione del venerdì santo, detta <schiavellatione> da schiavellare, togliere i chiodi dal crocifisso.”²⁷

Another inventory, this one from the Cathedral in Siena, mentions how “[...]One wooden crucifix, carved, large, it is used for the Holy Friday.”²⁸

²⁵ *Ibidem.*, 148.

²⁶ *Ibidem.*, 150.

²⁷ *Inventario della Confraternita di San Feliciano – Inventario Sagrestia 1425, aprile 10* (Foligno, Archivio di Stato, Ospedale 926, Ms cartaceo, privo di guardia), published by Mario Sensi, *Fraternite Disciplinate*, 152. Bernardi, *La Drammaturgia*, 441-442. Kopania, *Animated Sculptures*, 50. Translation: Temporary Devotions specifically mentioned in the inventory of 1425 are: the devotion of the Holy Friday, called “Schiavellatione” from pulling out and taking away the nails from the crucifix”

²⁸ *Inventario degli Arredi Artistici dell’Opera Metropolitana di Siena dell’Anno 1482. Cited after* Taubert, “*Mittelalterliche Kruzifixe*”, 91. Kopania, *Animated Sculptures*, 50. “Uno crucifixo di legno, rilevato, grande, s’adopera il venerdì Sancto.”

From a chronicle of the city of Perugia dated 1448 there is the record of a public performance in which an animated sculpture of the crucified Christ took the place of a live actor that was playing the role of Jesus Christ:²⁹

“On 29 March, which was Good Friday, the said Friar Ruberto started again his daily preaching in the square. On the Holy Thursday he preached on Communion and invited the whole population to come on Good Friday; and at the end of the said sermon on the Passion he performed this play [rappresentazione]: this is, he

²⁹ Alessandro D’Ancona, *Origini del Teatro Italiano Libri tre con due Appendici sulla Rappresentazione Drammatica del Contado Toscano e sul Teatro Mantovano nel Sec. XVI*. (Torino: E. Loescher, 1891), 280-81. The original document come from: Perugia, BAP, ms. 1022, [cronaca detta del Graziani]. Cited after Mara Nerbano, *Il Teatro della Devozione: Confraternite e Spettacolo nell’Umbria Medievale*, (Perugia: Morlacchi, 2006), 79-80. “Adì 29 de marzo, che fu el Vienardì Santo, recomenzò ditto frate Ruberto a predicare in piazza ogni dì, et el Giovedì Santo predicò della comunione, et invitò tutto el populo per lo Vienardì Santo. Et nel fine della ditta predica della Passione fece quista rappresentazione: cioè predicava in capo della piazza fuera della porta de S. Lorenzo, dove era ordinato uno terrato della porta perfina al cantone verso casa de Cherubino degli Armanne. Et lì, quando se devè mostrare el Crucifisso, uscì fuera de S. Lorenzo Eliseo de Cristofano, barbiere de Porta S. Angelo, a guise de Cristo nudo con la croce in spalla, con la corona de spine in testa, e le suoi carne parevano battute e flagellate come quando Cristo fu batutto. Et lì parecchie armate lo menavano a crucifigere, et andarono giù verso la fonte intorno alle persone e perfina al rembocho degli Scudellare, e argiero su alla udientia del Cambio, e argiero nella porta de S. Lorenzo, e intraro nel ditto terrato; et lì, a mezzo al terrato, glie se fece incontra una a guise del la Vergene Maria vestita tutta de negro, piangendo e parlando cordogliosamente quillo che accadeva in simile misterio della passione de Iesu Cristo. Et gionti che fuoro al pergholo de frate Ruberto, lì stette un pezo con la croce in spalla, et sempre tutto el populo piangeva e gridando misericordia. E puoi puseno giù la ditta croce e pusonce uno crocifisso che ce stava prima, e dirzaro su la ditta croce: et allora li stride del populo fuoro assai maggiori. E ai piei della dicta croce la Nostra Donna comenzò el lament insieme con San Giovanni et Maria Madalena e Maria Salome, li quali disseno alcune stantie del lamento della Passione. E puoi venne Nichodemo e Iosephi ab Arimathia, e scavigliarono el corpo de Iesu Cristo, quale lo poseno in gremio della Nostra Donna, e puoi lo miseno nel monumento; et sempre tutto el populo piangendo ad alta voce. Et molti disseno che mai più fu fatta in Peroscia la più bella e la più devotadevotione de quista. Et in quella mane se feceno sei frate: uno fu ditto Eliseo, quale era uno stolto garzone; Tomasso de Marchegino; Bino che stava con li Priori; el figlio de Boccho del Borgo de Santo Antonio; e meser Ricciere de Franceschone de Tanolo; et molti altri se ne erano vestiti prima per le prediche de ditto frate Ruberto”.

preached at the top of the square outside the door of San Lorenzo where a platform was prepared [?era ordinate un terrato] from the door to the corner towards the house of Cherubino degli Armanne. And there, when it was time to show the Crucifix, out of San Lorenzo came Eliseo de Cristofano, barber at the Gate of Sant'Angnolo, representing [a guisa de] the naked Christ with the cross in his shoulder and the crown of thorns on his head; and his fleash seemed beaten and scourged, as when Christ was scourged. And several armed men [armate] took him to be crucified. And they went down towards the fountain, around the crowd, as far as the entrance to the Scudellare, and they turned [argiero] at the Exchange [audienza del Cambio] and returned [argiero] to the door of San Lorenzo and went onto the said platform [terrato]; and there, in the middle of the platform, someone [una] went towards him in the garb of the Virgin Mary dressed all in black, weeping and speaking sorrowfully, as was done in the similar play [misterio] of the Passion of Jesus Christ; and when they arrived at the scaffold [?pergolo] of Friar Roberto, he stood there for a long time with the cross on his shoulder, and all the while the people wept and cried for mercy. Then they put down the said cross and took up a crucifix which was already there, and they erected the said cross; and then the wailing of the people grew louder. At the foot of said cross, Our Lady started her lament together with St John and Mary Magdalene and Mary Salome, and they said some stanzas from the lament of the Passion. Then came Nicodemus and Joseph of

Arimathea, and they freed the body of Christ from the nails [scavigliarono], put in the lap of Our Lady, and then laid it in the sepulcher; and throughout the people continued to weep loudly. And many said that there had never been performed in Perugia a more beautiful and pious play [devozione] than this one. And on the morning six friars were professed [?se fecero]: one was said Eliseo, who was foolish youth, Tomasso de Marchegino, Bino who used to live with the Priors, the son of Bocco del Borgo de Santo Antonio, and Master Riciere de Francescone de Tanolo, and many others had taken the habit before, because the sermons of the said Friar Ruberto.”³⁰

“Jospeh and Nicodemus shall rise up and lay the ladder against the cross, and Jospeh shall go up the ladder and tie the body of Christ to the cross with a cloth. Then they shall turn right and with the hammer hit the nail tip to show they are extracting it. And as soon as the Virgin Mary hears that blow, with great lament she shall scream out loud, and Jospeh shall extract the nail from the right hand and with getsures of extracting it with labor. The turning to St. John they shall say while handing out the nail (...) Jospeh shalle xtract the [nail] from the left hand and shall give it to St. John withouth saying anything more. Then Jospeh shall support the body and Nicodemus shall extract the nail from the feet and shall give it to St. John.

³⁰ *English translation from: Meredith, Peter, and John E. Tailby, The Staging of Religious Drama in Europe in the Later Middle Ages: Texts and Documents in English Translation, (Kalamazoo, Mich: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1983), 248-249. Cite after Kopania, Animated Sculptures, 48-49.*

Then they shall send the body down and everybody shall support it. The Virgin Mary shall take it obliquely and sit with her shoulder against the cross and her face towards the crowds, and shall hold the body of her dead son lying obliquely on her lap of the two Maries, one shall be on one side of the Virgin and the other on the other side, facing in the same directions as the Virgin is. Joseph and Nicodemus shall be near the head of Christ. Mary Magdalene shall be at [Christ's] feet and St. John [shall be] on the same side as the Magdalene. According to each one's customs, everyone shall cry all together beating themselves." ³¹

In this document there is not a direct reference to the use of an animated sculpture, but considering the mention to the action of *schiavellazione* (to pull out the nails from the body of Christ) - e Nicodemo cavi fuera el chiodo di piedi (and

³¹ 483 manuscript of Vittorio Emanuele's fund of the National Library in Rome. Cited after Ilaria Tamani, *The Piety's Theatre: Mobile Crucifixes in Holy Friday's Depositions*, text of speech at *IX Colloque Société Internationale pour l'Étude du Théâtre Médiéval – Elx, du 9 au 14 d'août 2004*, <http://parnaseo.uv.es/Ars/webelx/Pon%C3%A8ncies%20pdf/Tamani.pdf> [accessed on July 2014]. Kopania, *Animated Sculptures*, 49. A similar circumstance was documented in Bologna where a *sacra rappresentazione* titled *Pianto de nostra Donna* was organized: "Yoseph e Nicodemo se lievino suxo e ponano le scale a la croce, e Yoseph vada suxo per la scala e prima lighi il corpo de Christo a la croce a traverso con un panexello. Poi voltisi a la man dritta e con lo martello dia una botta ne la puncta del chiodo per mostrare de cavarlo. E subito che la Vergene Maria santa quella botta, con gran lamento dica ad alta voce, e Yoseph stia fermo ad ascoltarla [...]. Yoseph cavi fuera el chiodo de la man dritta e con giesti da cavarlo per forza. Poi voltisi a San Zohanne e dicali porgendoli il chiodo [...]. Yoseph cavi quello dela sinistra mano e dialo a San Zohanne senza dir altro. Poi Yoseph sostenga el corpo e Nicodemo cavi fuera el chiodo di piedi e dialo a san Zohanne. Po' mandino giuso il corpo e tucti lo sostengano. La Vergene Maria el prenda a traverso e ponase a sedere in megio con le spalle apozate a la croce e il viso volto verso il populo e tenga il corpo del figliol morto disteso in grembo a traverso. Le due Marie, ne stia una da un lato da la Vergene e l'altra dal altro lato, volte con lo viso come sta la Vergene. Yoseph e Nicodemo stiano verso il capo de Christo. La Magdalena stia ali piedi e san Zohanne dal lato de la Magdalena. Come sono acunci a li luochi suoi, tucti insieme piangano battandosi con le mani.

Nicodemus pulled out the nail from the feet)– we can reasonably assume that they used an animated sculpture for this *sacra rappresentazione*.

These documentations are extremely valuable for understanding these sculptures' use and the context of their use. While the rarity with which we can find documentation regarding these sculptures or these public passion plays might appear to suggest that they were not worth mention, they were clearly well-established within the devotional context of the city, and by virtue of their pervasive presence within this context, they attained a normalcy that did not require documentation. This is evidenced by the case of Perugia in 1448, which it seems was particularly successful from the preaching of Roberto da Lecce to a representation of the Passion itself singular enough to merit attention in the chronicle of the city.³² What is particularly interesting about the *sacra rappresentazione* in Perugia is that a person played the part of Jesus: the barber Eliseo di Cristofano went out from the door of the cathedral “...like the naked Christ, with the cross on his shoulder, with the crown of thorns in his head, and his flesh seem beaten and flagellated like Christ was beaten; and there are many soldiers that pushing him to the crucifixion.”³³

That there was a real person playing the role of Jesus is notable. Since the earliest of those celebrations linked to the Passion of Christ, while celebrants felt

³² Nerbano, *Il teatro della Devozione*, 189.

³³ Cronaca detta del Graziani, 598. Quoted after Nerbano, *Il Teatro della Devozione*, 189. “a guisa de Cristo nudo con la croce in spalla, con la corona de spine in testa, e le suoi carne parevano battute e flagellate como quando Cristo fu battuto; et li parecchie armate lo menavano a crucifigere.”

comfortable substituting real people for other characters, they had always kept a sculpture in the role of Christ in order to avoid disorienting the faithful and risking the problem of the faithful venerating a person during the play or the liturgy.

Indeed, even in this development of the *sacra rappresentazione* in Perugia, at the moment of the crucifixion, a sculpture was substituted for the actor. The substitution was made after the barber Eliseo di Cristofano moved close to the pulpit of Fra' Roberto da Lecce, holding the cross on his shoulder—and after the audience was moved to tears. At this point, the torturers “puseno giù la ditta croce, e pusonce uno crucifisso che ce stava prima, e drizaro su la ditta croce.”³⁴ So in order to reenact the moment of the crucifixion and the descent from the cross, a sculpture was still used, rather than a living actor. This crucifix was life-size and it was crucified on the same cross that the actor had carried. This procedure clearly had a real and strong emotional impact on the audience as, according to the *Cronaca* written by Graziani, once the cross was raised at the display of the crucified body of Christ “*allora li stride del populo fuoro assai maggiori*” (the screams of the population were even louder).³⁵ This crucifix could have been similar to the one venerated in the confraternity of Annunziata in Perugia, which was flexible at the joints and

³⁴ Ibidem., 599. Quoted after Nerbano, *Il Teatro della Devozione*, 194. Translation: “put down the cross and put over a crucifix that was already there, and then they reised the cross.”

³⁵ Ibidem., 599. Quoted after Nerbano, *Il Teatro della Devozione*, 194.

featured real hair and a beard, as well as human integument filled with cords connected to each other.³⁶ **(Fig 4)**.

Usually there was a differentiation between the liturgy within the official cult of the church and the *sacre rappresentazioni*, in which an actor would perform the role of Christ. Even though they were part of the celebrations of the Holy Week, as was the case with the play in Perugia, they were part of a preaching and they were performed in public spaces, these representations were real theater.³⁷ What is important for this study is not to make clear the distinctions between liturgy and theater, but to consider the role of sculptures in this liminal dimension in which the devotional drama is enacted.

We need to revise the starting point for study of these objects. They are not simply sculptures or objects used for devotion and veneration. They become the real Christ, the real body, and spiritual and corporeal access to the Passion of Christ. These sculptures were able to catalyze the religious and social community into one audience, and the celebrations around these sculptures were so powerful that the aura created continued to affect subsequent representation of religious scenes at the beginning of the Renaissance.

³⁶ Serafino Siepi, *Descrizione Topologico-Istorica della Città di Perugia* (Perugia: Garbinesi i Santicci, 1822), 729. As quoted in Nerbano, *Il Teatro della Devozione*, 194 and Elvio Lunghi "Considerazioni ed Ipotesi sulle Sculture Lignee nelle Chiese dell'Umbria tra il XII e il XIII Secolo. "The skin of this sculpture was taken from a cadaver (usually from a prisoner or someone sentenced to death) and adapted for the sculpture", 8.

³⁷ Gesine and Johannes Taubert, "*Mittelalterliche Kruzifixe*, 111-112.

Scholars argue persuasively that these sculptures are the means of access to the sacred by the laity and articulate how this is also a means of bringing the sacred into everyday life.³⁸ The fact that these sculptures were able to represent and embody the incarnation of Christ, as well as to be substituted for a real actor during the passion plays to great effect, as occurred in Perugia, shows the power of these objects in actually representing realistically the body of Christ. In general, at the core of Christianity there is an element of authenticity that is at the base of the presentation and representation of the mysteries of the faith, which differentiates itself from the theater and representation of pagan nature.³⁹ The theater before the diffusion of Christianity provided only a fictive reality even when involved the pathos of the human condition. This concept and difference between the pagan and Christian theater is explained very carefully in one of the passages of the confessions of Saint Augustine:

“Theatrical shows, filled with depictions of my miseries and with tinder for my own fire, completely carried me away. What is it that makes a

³⁸ David Morgan, *Visual Piety: a History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 50-51. Lucia Cardone, Lorenzo Carletti, “La Devozione Continua” in *Sacre Passioni: Scultura Ligna a Pisa dal XII al XV secolo*. edited by Mariagiulia Burrelli (Milano: F. Motta, 2000), 239. Claudio Bernardi, “Deposizioni ed Annunciazioni” in *Il teatro delle Statue: Gruppi Lignei di Deposizione e Annunciazione tra XII e XIII secolo : atti del Convegno "Attorno ai Gruppi Lignei della Deposizione" : Milano, 15-16 maggio 2003, Museo Diocesano Fondazione S. Ambrogio, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore*, (Milano: V&P., 2005), 80.

³⁹ Leonardo Lugaresi, “Tra evento e rappresentazione. Per un’interpretazione della polemica contro gli spettacoli nei primi secoli cristiani,” *Rivista di Storia e Letteratura Religiosa*, 9, n. 43, (1989), 455.

man want to become sad in beholding mournful and tragic events which he himself would not willingly undergo? Yet, as he watches, he wishes to suffer their sorrow; this sorrow is his own pleasure. What is this but a wretched weakness of mind? For, the less sane a person is in regard to such feelings, the more he is moved by these things; although, when he himself suffers, it is usually called misery; when he suffers for others, compassion. But, what kind of compassion is in the make-believe things of the theater? A member of the audience is not incited to give help; rather, he is simply enticed to feel sorrow: the more sorrowful he becomes, the more highly does he regard the author of those presentations. Thus, if these calamitous events of the men of old, or of fiction, are so presented that the spectator is not moved to sorrow, he goes away scornful and critical; but, if he does become sorrowful, he remains, giving full attention and enjoying it."⁴⁰

Saint Augustine's quote stresses the fact that the spectator is "enticed to feel sorrow, the more sorrowful he becomes, the more highly does he regard the author of those presentations" while in the Christian reenactment of the Passion of Christ

⁴⁰ Augustine, and Vernon J. Bourke. *Confessions* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), Book 3 Chapter 2.2, 50. <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10383925>. As quoted as well in Lugaresi, *Tra Evento e Rappresentazione*, 455.

faithful are spectators but at the same time they become participants because what is represented is happened for real and also there is not a stage that separates the main scene with the beholders, but the faithful become actors, they are part of it and what is happening is real.⁴¹ The sculptural medium, and especially wooden animated sculptures of the crucified Christ, seems to embody this element of authenticity most strongly, even as it is able to satisfy both the official liturgical necessities of the church and the extralitururgical needs of the lay confraternities.

The lauda, the pictorial production and the importance of sculpture

For example, generally when scholars have studied the relationship between the literature and art production of the period, they have concentrated on pictorial productions without paying much attention to the sculptural production. The *lauda* was therefore compared or linked to painting—most often frescos or panel painting. This is the case in Italian scholar Pietro Scarpellini's contribution to the subject, his 1981 article "*Echi della lauda nella pittura umbra del XII e XIV secolo.*" Scarpellini tried to understand the dynamic between Umbrian painting during the period between the twelfth and the fourteenth century and *laude* production. In his argument, he took the fresco in transept of the basilica Superiore in Assisi with the

⁴¹ Leonardo Lugaresi, *Tra Evento e Rappresentazione*, 454.

Crucifixion by Cimabue as a starting point. **(Fig 5)**. The organization of the scene painted by Cimabue shows a detachment from the byzantine style and provides a new grammar of gestures.⁴² This new emotional interpretation of the gestures has been connected by the scholars to the liturgical drama *Planctus Mariae* from Cividale, which provided—along with a text to be read aloud—a description of the gestures to be performed during the recitation.⁴³

An example is the expression of sorrow toward the Passion of Christ by Mary Magdalene: *Here she turns to the men with arms outstretched – O brothers – Here to the women – and sisters – where is my hope? – Here she beats her breast – Where is my consolation? – here she elevates her hand – Where is all salvation? – here bending her head, prostrates herself at the feet of Christ – O My Master?*⁴⁴

Karl Young's early study supported the initial theory about the connection of the *Planctus* to the origin of the drama of the Passion. He thought that the mourning of the Virgin Mary was articulated specifically for use in a dramatic setting, and that, given these parts were meant to be acted, these were the elements allowing the dramatization of the celebrations of the Passion.⁴⁵

⁴² Eugenio Battisti, *Cimabue* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1967), 50.

⁴³ *Ibidem.*, 50.

⁴⁴ *Hic vertat se ad homines cum brachiis extensis / O fratres / Hic ad mulieres / et sorores / ubi est spes mea? / Hic percutiat pectus / Ubi consolacio mea? / Hic manus elevet / Ubi tota salus? / Hic, inclinatur capite, sternat se ad pedes Christi / O MAGISTER MI?* (the part in Italics refer to the gestures) As quoted in Battisti, *Cimabue*, 51.

⁴⁵ Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), vol 1, 538.

More recently, on the other hand, scholars have acknowledged that the *Planctus* was one of the elements contributing to the development of the drama of the Passion, rather than its beginning.⁴⁶ The real focus of the Holy Week and the *Planctus* was a secondary moment within the celebration of the Passion.⁴⁷ As a consequence, the *Planctus*, the *Planctus* , despite its importance, did not retain a prominent role within the dynamic of the celebration of the Passion as scholars initially thought. This realization suggests it is unlikely to have been the sole source of inspiration for Cimabue's *Crucifixion*. Accordingly, drawing a direct parallel between the two, or more generally between text and painting, would not be entirely correct.

If, in fact, the Passion since the twelfth century, as well as through the Middle Ages, were the focus of the devotion, and if the *Planctus* were not the core of this celebration, what would the stimulus be that molded piety toward the Passion as we know it in the Middle Ages? Obviously the pictorial medium played a major role in spreading the life of Christ, not only as a didactic medium but especially as visual memory utilized to contemplate the life and suffering of Christ. However, the pictorial still lacks something which enabled the dramatic sensibility surrounding the Passion of Christ, which was not only a meditation, but also identification and participation.

⁴⁶ Maria Sofia De Vito, *L'Origine del Dramma Liturgico* (Milano: Società anonima editrice Dante Alighieri, 1938), 160. Cited in Sandro Sticca, *The Planctus Mariae in the Dramatic Tradition of the Middle Ages*. Athens [Ga.]: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 5.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem.*, 7.

Other scholars have dealt with subject of trying to understand the connection between art and drama in this period.⁴⁸ The literature on this relationship varies from arguing the impossibility of proving a reciprocal connection (See Nagler and Sheingorn) between the roles of both art and drama.⁴⁹ In *The Intertextuality of Late Medieval Art and Drama*, Martin Stevens attempts to reconsider the relationship between art and drama by arguing that “its nexus is intertextual, not casual or agentive”.⁵⁰ In order to make this case, Martin examines the Passion panel by Hans Memling now in the Galleria Sabauda in Turin (**Fig 6**). Memling’s painting is considered as an idea of a performance that pushed the viewer in a deconstructive act, presenting the city as theater and the theater as city.⁵¹ According to Stevens, the way that the painting stages the Passion becomes a sort of *theatrum mundi* that involves, at the same time, the viewer and the spectator.⁵² The performance and the painting become a specular image of one another, and both the painting and the performance (Passion Play) becomes the reference of each other.

⁴⁸ Martin Stevens, "The Intertextuality of Late Medieval Art and Drama". *New Literary History*. 22 (2), 1991: 317-337. *Other scholars that dealt with the subject are:* A. M. Nagler, *The Medieval Religious Stage: Shapes and Phantoms* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976); Clifford Davidson, *Drama and Art: an Introduction to the Use of Evidence from the Visual Arts for the Study of Early Drama* (Kalamazoo, Mich: Medieval Institute, Western Michigan University, 1977); Pamela Sheingorn, "Using Medieval Art in the Study of Medieval Drama," *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama*, 22 (1979), 101-9.

⁴⁹ Clifford Davidson, *Drama and Art: an Introduction to the Use of Evidence from the Visual Arts for the Study of Early Drama* (Kalamazoo, Mich: Medieval Institute, Western Michigan University, 1977); as cited in Martin Stevens, "The Intertextuality of Late Medieval Art and Drama". *New Literary History*. 22 (2), 1991: 317.

⁵⁰ Stevens, "The Intertextuality, 318.

⁵¹ *Ibidem.*, 328.

⁵² *Ibidem.*, 329.

While this argument is plausible, it is worth noting that the sculptural medium is excluded yet again. I would argue, however, that the sculptural medium was precisely the channel and the dimension that shaped piety during the Middle Ages and catalyzed the literature, the images, and contemporaneous understanding of and access to the sacred. The *Planctus* providing direction for gestures, as I mentioned before, implies that action and a more tridimensional setting were an important property of the sculptural medium. Either this action was part of a liturgy or an extraliturgical performance; the remarkable part is the atmosphere that would have been created during this enactment, and the fact that one could use a sculpture to embody or represent the characters around the Crucifixion or just Christ as manifestation of the sacred. The example of the Passion Play in Perugia is probably the most direct example of the power of these sculptures in representing the body of Christ in direct symbiosis with the real person that was acting as Christ before the moment of the Crucifixion.

While this was possible for Passion Plays outside the church, where the ceremonial inside the church was concerned, it was not possible for an actor to stand in for a sculpture (or animated sculpture), a cross, or even the holy host. The main difference in this case would have been that the faithful would not have been able (and probably the Church would not permit) to identify the actor with Christ, while this would have happened with a wooden sculpture, particularly with the

animated sculpture of Christ.⁵³ On the other hand, this could have happened in paraliturgical ceremonies, such as the Passion Play in Perugia, where both an actor and a sculpture were utilized, while a friar was responsible for the preaching.⁵⁴

The use of animated sculptures in the rite of the *Depositio Crucis* has already been the subject of study. The earliest document to mention the use of these sculptures during the rite of the Descent from the cross is a part of a document of the *Ordinarium Barkingense* (ca. 1363-1367) from the town of Barking near London.⁵⁵ The origin and development of the Holy Week ceremonies date from before the use of these wooden sculptures. In addition, the utilization of wooden simulacra was acknowledged since the early Classical period when pagan divinities were venerated in temples both in the cities and the countryside.⁵⁶ Thus, it is clear that the ceremonies developed before the use of the sculptures, however these objects had been integrated since the eleventh century (the indicative date of the oldest surviving Descent from the Cross). The use of these sculptures was not new, but was already common from the early Classical period onward.

⁵³ Kopania, *Animated Sculptures*, 143-144.

⁵⁴ See note 29 on this chapter.

⁵⁵ David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 286.

⁵⁶ Lorenzo Carletti and Cristiano Giometti, "Medieval Wood Sculpture and Its Setting in Architecture: Studies in Some Churches in and around Pisa", *Architectural History*, Vol. 46, (2003), 37. Quote: "The Roman art historian Livy, among others, indicates that these statue played an important role in sacred ceremonies: 'From the temple of Apollo two white cows were led through the Porta Carmentalis into the city; behind these two statues in cypress wood of Juno Regina were carried.'" The rich corpus of extant medieval woods sculptures, together with some detailed written sources, confirm the substantial affinity between the pagan and Christian worlds.

It should be noted that, according to the surviving documents concerning the *Deposition Crucis*, which make specific reference to the use of animated sculptures of the crucified Christ, the utilization of these simulacra did not alter the organization of the ceremony.⁵⁷ However, the use of the sculpture added a dimension of authenticity not only to the simple presence of Christ, but also to the authenticity of the ceremony from the moment of the Descent from the Cross until the burial.

For example, they were life-size, as was the case for the group of the Descents, but there was also the possibility to move their limbs (usually the arms), head, or tongue. Considering that these sculptures were made during a period of time that extends from the twelfth until the sixteenth century and that their production involves different countries in Western Europe, it would be impossible to catalog them according to any specific artistic style. Jung's study, *The Phenomenal Lives of Movable Christ Sculptures*, which involves sculptures from the southern German-speaking region, states that it was very difficult, if not impossible, to group them according to style, both because the style varies so much and because a lack of proper documentation prevents an accurate accounting of chronology, geographical distribution, or even place of origin⁵⁸. Furthermore, many of these objects have been altered and transformed through the centuries. Accordingly, she opted to group

⁵⁷ Kopania, *Animated Sculptures*, 138.

⁵⁸ Tanya Jung, *The Phenomenal Lives of Movable Christ Sculptures* (PhD Dissertation, University of Maryland, 2006), 16. See also Gesine and Johannes Taubert, "Mittelalterliche Kruzifixe mit schwenkbaren Armeb. Ein Beitrag zur Verwendung von Bildwerken der Liturgia" in *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Vereins für Kunstwissenschaft*, 23, (1969), 91.

these sculptures according to their forms, media, and functions, considering the fact that all were used as real Christ during the celebrations of the Holy Week.⁵⁹

As Tanya Jung argues, scholarship needs to overcome the concept that these sculptures were only objects utilized within the popular devotion, or just a confirmation of the liturgical or paraliturgical ceremonies, especially as demonstration of what was reported in written text.⁶⁰ In fact, the number of sculptures surpass the number of written records linked to them.⁶¹ Even for the rite of the *Depositio*, the written records are rare, and certainly rarer than the actual surviving sculptures. Furthermore, this ritual was never reported in the Roman Rite. Karl Young suggested that this was the result of the extralitururgical nature of these kinds of ceremonials ⁶², but further studies on the subject concluded that, particularly in the case of the rite of the *Depositio*, these ceremonials come from the organization of the Roman Rite and were so common that they did not need to be recorded.⁶³

The study of these objects needs to move beyond conceptualizing them as passive elements of the liturgy or just as popular art. Starting from their likeness and their performative function, my aim is to explore what kind of relationship they

⁵⁹ Ibidem., 16.

⁶⁰ Ibidem., 3.

⁶¹ Kopania, *Animated Sculptures*, 138.

⁶² Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, 114.

⁶³ Kolomban P. Gschwend, *Die Deposition und Elevatio Crucis in Raum der altern Diözese Brixen* (Sarnen: 1965), 60-69. As quoted in Jung, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, 60.

built with the viewer and how they affected the understanding of the sacred, as well as how this expands beyond the moment of the ritual itself. Especially for the animated sculptures of the crucified Christ, as David Freedberg stated in his study *The Power of Images*, we need to use the relationship between the image and the beholders as a starting point; “this response is predicated on the efficacy and effectiveness (imputed or otherwise) of images. We must consider not only the beholder’s symptoms and behavior, but also the effectiveness, efficacy, and vitality of images themselves; not only what beholders do, but also what images appear to do; not only what people do as result of their relationship with imaged form, but also what they expect imaged form to achieve, and why they have such expectations at all.”⁶⁴ This allows us to overcome the simple approach in which style and authorship hold a prominent role and, particularly in the case of these sculptures, have had a deleterious effect.⁶⁵ First of all, while these sculptures were initially used within an established ritual, without a doubt they contributed to the enhancement of the ritual itself, carrying new meaning and a novel devotional experience.

⁶⁴ Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, xxii.

⁶⁵ Georges Didi-Huberman has discussed the difficulty of style criticism and dating for wax sculptures due to the nature of the medium and its purpose of and use. He also stressed the presence of a “*philosophical prejudice*” in favor of the Platonic *Idea*, that - since Vasari until Erwin Panofsky - diminished the value and consideration of the material aspect of the artworks.

“Viscosities and Survivals. Art History Put to the Test by the Material” in *Ephemeral Bodies : Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure*, edited by Panzanelli, Roberta., and Schlosser, Julius. (Los Angeles, Calif.: Getty Research Institute, 2008), 154-169.

Sculpture as “real” body

The first aspect that I want to begin to explore is how these sculptures present the idea of the body. As I mention above, they were life-sized with moveable limbs, and in some cases they had mechanisms which would allow the sculpture to move the tongue **(Fig 7)** or possess real hair or beards. **(Fig 8)** This was not simply a matter of practicality to facilitate performing rites during the liturgy or outside the official liturgy, such as passion plays. This was the result of a connection in which the sculpture was not just the object, but it was able to become the real body of Christ, able to overcome the boundaries between the imaginary world and the real.

The animated sculpture of Christ, now in the Museum of Palazzo Santi in Cascia, was first part of a larger group of the Descent from the Cross. What is striking about this early fourteenth century sculpture is the presence, above the loincloth of Christ, of pubic hair. **(Fig 9)**. Even though it was painted, it demonstrates an attention to anatomical detail that we will be able to see much later in painting. The case of Cascia might be a rare case, but what it has in common with the other sculptures is an attention to the anatomical details and the realistic depiction it, which is both peculiar and intrinsic to the essence of these objects and their devotional use. The fact that faithful would approach them to touch and kiss them as worshipping the body of Christ, a realistic representation of a body would

have enhanced and realized this experience. From the creation, use, and modification of the wooden group of the Descent from the Cross up through the animated sculpture of Christ, we observe a process of identification with and participation in the sacred scene and the presence of Christ that does not happen with other media or religious images.

This was also enhanced by the fact that wood, being a living material, could function like a real body and this belief affected the making of the sculpture since the tree was cut down.⁶⁶ Wood, differing from stone and metals, was more noble and pure because of its closeness to the human being. In fact, wood, like humans, lives, suffers, decays and dies, and heartwood was compared to the flesh of the man.⁶⁷

Even the painting process of the sculptures was not interpreted as a way to cover the inner structure but rather to expand the vital aspects of the material and the sculptures.⁶⁸

The choice of the wood itself was a precise process that corresponded to both a practical function and a symbolic one. The most common wood utilized for

⁶⁶ Christina Neilson, "Carving life: the meaning of wood in early modern European sculpture" in (2015). *The matter of art : Materials, practices, cultural logics, c. 1250-1750* (Studies in design) edited by Anderson, C., Dunlop, Anne, & Smith, Pamela H (Manchester University Press, 2015), 225.

⁶⁷ Michel Pastoureau, "Introduction a la symbolique medievale du bois," *L'arbre: histoire naturelle et symbolique de l'arbre, du bois et du fruit au Moyen-Age*, (1993): 26.

⁶⁸ Neilson, *Carving life*, 231.

the making of the sculptures are the limewood and poplar.⁶⁹ Limewood guaranteed a more detailed possibility of carving even if it was common the use of plaster to shape the particular features of the sculptures. If they were not sculpted sometimes twines were used to create some anatomical details such as tendons and veins.⁷⁰ Once the wooden structure was modeled and a uniform and compact surface was created, colors were added to finish the sculpture.⁷¹

The sculpture of the Crucified Christ was not just a symbol or isolated image, but, rather, was right at the center of the religious and social space showing his presence through its bodily features. The corporality of the dead Christ expressed by the animated sculpture of the crucified Christ was the catalyst for the *imitatio Christi*. These wooden sculptures allowed a further dimension to be added to the contemplation of images which, especially in the Late Middle Ages, came to play a pivotal role. These devotional practices were heightened by the bodily presence of Christ in this act of identification, in which the body of the believers became the mirror of these simulacra. Painted images of the passion of Christ played an

⁶⁹ Raffaele Casciaro, "Tecnica e Stile: I dati coincidono?", in *Riflessioni sul Rinascimento Scolpito. Contributi, analisi e approfondimenti in margine alla mostra di Camerino 5 maggio - 5 novembre 2006* ed. Maria Giannatiempo López and Raffaele Casciaro (Pollenza: Tipografia San Giuseppe, 2006), 57. For more information about the material used to make wooden sculptures see also: Saponi, Giovanna, and Bruno Toscano. *La Deposizione Ligneae in Europa: l'Immagine, il Culto, la Forma*. Milano: Electa, 2004. Michael Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980.

⁷⁰ Ibidem., 59.

⁷¹ Antonietta Gallone, "L'Arcangelo Raffaele e Tobiolo. Studio analitico del colore" in in *Riflessioni sul Rinascimento Scolpito. Contributi, analisi e approfondimenti in margine alla mostra di Camerino 5 maggio - 5 novembre 2006* ed. Maria Giannatiempo López and Raffaele Casciaro (Pollenza: Tipografia San Giuseppe, 2006), 64.

important role during the late Medieval period in soliciting devotional practice that imitated Christ; alternately, the sculptures provided His actual presence, allowing a real participation in his corporeal death and in the last moment of the Passion. Furthermore, sculptures that we find in churches and oratory used by lay confraternities had the power to exist and be activated in this liminal realm between sacred and profane. This enabled them to provide an effective means for revealing what was invisible through the visible⁷², in reference both to the presence of Christ as well as in realistically representing something that happened in another time and another place. In some cases when the sculptures were used along with the sacred host for the ceremonials during the Holy Week in both liturgical and extralitururgical ceremonies, “the theological distinction between image and sacrament was further elided and representation and sacred presence were automatically conflated.”⁷³

The Church supported the significance that these objects started to embody, going beyond the symbolic meaning. Beside the ritual use, these sculptures were approached by the faithful and touched and kissed. In some cases, in order to fully represent the moments of the passion of Christ, these sculptures were even anointed. This occurred in the case of the animated sculpture of Christ in the Church of Saint Francis in Leonessa (**Fig 10**); the polychrome fifteenth century sculpture turned black over the years because the wood absorbed the ointment that was

⁷² Jung, *The Phenomenal Lives of Movable Christ Sculptures*, 43.

⁷³ *Ibidem.*, 91.

applied to it during the celebrations of the Holy Friday.⁷⁴ What happened with the sculpture in Leonessa shows how the relationship between the confraternity, or the faithful more generally, and the sculpture is human-like, and demonstrates how during these ceremonies the sculptures, once activated, would become the real body of Christ. If we acknowledge this kind of association and treatment as something normal, inherent of the nature of the animated wooden sculptures of Christ, in their capability to be treated and viewed as a real body, we would be able to connect and better understand what happened in the above- mentioned Passion Play that occurred in Perugia. In fact, the substitution of the sculpture for the actor at the moment of the Crucifixion would not create a problem of visual discontinuity, even conceptually, because of this visceral association between the sculpture and the physical essence of Christ.

Beyond the famous story of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and his embrace with Christ while praying in front of a Cross, there are other examples during the Medieval period that show the physical presence of Christ and contact with the believer. For example Rupert of Deuz reports that he experienced an embrace with

⁷⁴ The Ministero per i Beni e le Attività culturali del Lazio forbid the Confraternita di Santa Croce in Leonessa, which is responsible for the rite of *Scavigliazione*, to keep using the ointment because it would affect and ruin the wood of the sculpture. The confraternity complained because this would have altered the ritual, so they worked out a solution to use a different ointment that still works in the ceremonial, but at the same time does not affect the wood of the sculpture. This shows what kind of relationship the confraternity and the faithful have toward the ritual use of this sculpture. Even if the color of the sculpture faded away, this did not affect the sculpture looking like a real person.

Christ where he felt Christ's tongue in his mouth.⁷⁵ The mystic and visionary nun Margaret Ebner had an even more intimate experience with the representation of Christ, also in this case a wooden sculpture. According to her diary she would bring a life-sized wooden sculpture of Christ into her room at night and put it on top of her.⁷⁶ A related instance is the vision of Hadewijch of Antwerp in which, while it seems that a wooden sculpture was not involved, it is the corporeal presence which draws our attention. After the mystical reception of the sacraments, she continues: "Thereafter he came himself to me, and took me altogether in his arms, and pressed me to him, and all my limbs felt his complete satisfaction after my heart's desire and my humanity. This was outwardly enough and I was fulfilled in pleasure. And for a short while I had strength to endure this, after a shorter time I lost that beautiful outward man in his form, and I saw him become nothing and also fade and all dissolve into one so that I could not see him outside not could I distinguish him within me. Then it was at that hour that we were one without difference"⁷⁷

Caesarius of Heisterbach mentions in his works episodes that are similar to the embrace in Saint Bernard mystical moment. He talks about "the Lord Jesus Christ, [...] (whom) appeared visibly to another nun of our order, whose name I do

⁷⁵ Jung, *The Phenomenal Lives of Movable Christ Sculptures*, 95.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem.*, 96.

⁷⁷ Hadewijch, and Jozef Van Mierlo *De visioenen. 1, 1*. (Leuven [u.a.]: Vlaamsche boekenhalle. 1924), lines 74-88. As quoted in Mary Suydam, "Beguine Textuality: Sacred Performances" in *Performance and transformation: new approaches to late medieval spirituality*, edited by Suydam, Mary A., and Joanna E. Ziegler, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 192.

not wish to give, at a time when she was grievously tempted, and by his embrace changed all her trouble into the greatest peace.”⁷⁸ Another example provided by Caesarius of Heisterbach is about a monk of Hemmenrode, who was usually involved in meditating over the Passion of Christ with particular ardor. One day fell to his knees and “ [...] (Christ) withdrew his most merciful arms from the cross, embraced his servant, drawing him to his breast as one being dear to him, in sign of mutual friendship. He clasped him close; and by that embrace destroyed his strongest temptation.”⁷⁹

What matters in this case, beside the peculiarity of the example, is to see the intense physical experience and development of the relationship with the image. Another example comes from the Italian mystic Saint Angela from Foligno (1248 – 1309). In her *Memoriale* she describes how during a sermon she heard how the nails used to crucify Christ had ripped up his skin and how she wanted to see the tortured body of Christ: “Una volta pensavo al gran dolore che Cristo sostenne sulla croce. Pensavo a quei chiodi, di cui avevo sentito dire che avevano fatto entrare dentro nel legno brandelli di carne delle mani e dei piedi. E desideravo vedere della carne di Cristo almeno quell poco che i chiodi avevan così conficcato nel legno; e mi venne allora un così gran dolore per quell tormento di Cristo che non potei tenermi in

⁷⁸ Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus*, dist. 8, cap 16. As quoted in Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 306.

⁷⁹ Ibidem., dist. 8, cap 13. . As quoted in Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 306. This example as been quoted also by Tanya Jung, *The Phenomenal Lives of Movable Christ Sculptures*, 96-97.

piedi, ma mi piegai su di me, e sedetti, e prostrandomi, reclinai il capo sulle braccia che avevo disteso per terra.”⁸⁰

Angela mentions the nails that pierced the body of Christ and how she heard about them. She might have referred to a preacher that could have insisted to this particular trait of the suffering and Passion of Christ.

Inside the Convent of San Damiano in Assisi, there is a wooden panel which, in front, represents the Virgin and Child and, at the bottom, the portrait of the donor with a writing that identifies him with Corrado da Offida.⁸¹ **(Fig 11)** On the other side there is a crucifixion with Christ perforated by three large nails. Considering this painted panel, we acknowledge that even in painting the nails were represented in a dramatic way. During the thirteenth century, the nails represented in the crucifixion were just simple dots that would refer to the nails. This was the case both in paintings and sculptures. **(Fig 12)** Only later in the thirteenth century did the nails become a more predominant and specific component in the representation of the crucifixion of Christ in painting. This transition happened before in

⁸⁰ Angela da Foligno and Giovanni Pozzi, *Il Libro dell'Esperienza* (Milano: Adelphi, 1992), 116-117. Elvio Lunghi, *La Passione degli Umbri: Crocifissi in Legno in Valle Umbra tra Medioevo e Rinascimento* (Foligno: Edizioni Orfini Numeister, 2000), 92-94. Translation: “Once I was thinking about the great pain that Christ suffered (or endured or bore??) on the cross. I was thinking about those nails, and I heard that the nails pushed into the wood shreds of Christ flesh from hands and feet. And I wanted to see even the smallest piece of the flesh of Christ that the nails stuck into the wood; and I felt such a great pain for the torment of Christ, that I could not stand on my feet, but I bent over, and I sat, and I bowed down, I reclined my head over my stretched arms.”

⁸¹ Elvio Lunghi, “Mistici Umbri: Parole e Immagini” in Convegno “Attorno ai Gruppi Lignei della Deposizione”, and Francesca Flores d'Arcais, *Il Teatro delle Statue: Gruppi Lignei di Deposizione e Annunciazione tra XII e XIII secolo : Atti del Convegno "Attorno ai Gruppi Lignei della Deposizione"* (Milano: V&P., 2005), 146.

sculpture.⁸² One of the most famous examples is the representation of the *Christus Patiens* in Spello and Montefalco in which Saint Francis is positioned at the feet of Christ and kissing them. **(Fig 13)**.

In both the pictorial medium and the sculpted one, we have the presence of the nails as important symbol of the Passion. However, if we consider other aspects of the experience of Saint Angela of Foligno, we raise some interesting evaluations. In fact, according to her *Libro dell'Esperienza*: “Una volta assistendo ai vespri guardavo la croce; e contemplando il Crocifisso con gli occhi del corpo, all'improvviso l'anima fu accesa da un solo amore, e tutte le membra del corpo sentirono una grande gioia. E vedevo e sentivo che Cristo dentro di me abbracciava l'anima con quell braccio che era stato inchiodato alla croce [...]. E mi diletto di guardar quella mano segnata dal chiodo, che egli mi apre mentre pronuncia queste parole: <Ecco quella che tenne su me per voi>. [...] Per questa ragione, quando fu rappresentata la Passione di Cristo sulla piazza di Santa Maria (sarebbe stato un motivo da indurre al pianto), mi assalì tale contento e mi rapì con tale piacere che persi la parola, sotto il peso di quella gioia inenarrabile, caddi per terra. Allora cercai di allontanarmi dalla gente, e per grazia miracolosa riuscii ad appartarmi un poco. Caddi per terra, persi la parola e l'uso degli arti; mi parve allora che l'anima

⁸² Ibidem., 149.

fosse penetrate dentro nel fianco di Cristo. Non c'era in me tristezza, ma gioia indescrivibile.”⁸³

Most likely Angela would have been able to experience this indescribable joy more with a sculpted representation of Christ than a painted one, and it seems, considering the graphic representation of the pierced body of Christ, it could have been a sculpture linked to the iconography of the *Crucifixi Dolorosi*.

A wooden sculpted Crucifix (**Fig 14**) was found in the deposit of the diocesan seminary in Foligno and, given the dating and some physical features, (**Fig 15**) it was possible to associate it with this record of the life of the Saint Angela of Foligno. Another example is the *Crucifixi Dolorosi* that was found in the Church of San Domenico in Bevagna, very close to Foligno. (**Fig 16**).

According to accounts of her life, we are aware of her also meditating in front of a painted figure of the *Suffering Christ*, but the experience she had in front of the

⁸³ Angela da Foligno and Giovanni Pozzi, *Il libro dell'Esperienza*, 135-136. Cited after Lunghi, “Mistici Umbri, 148. Translation: “Once, while I was assisting the vespers, I was staring at the Cross; and while I was contemplating with my corporeal eyes, suddenly my soul was inflamed by one only love, and all my limbs felt a great joy. And I saw and felt that Christ inside me hugged my soul with the arm that was nailed on the cross [...] and it was a delight for me to be able to see that hand pierced by the nail, that he opens me while he says these words: “here it is that hold me up for you” [...] for this reason, when it was presented (acted – represented???) the Passion of Christ on the square of Saint Mary (it would have been a reason to cry), I was overwhelmed by such contentment and I was swept off by such a pleasure that I could not talk, under the weight of an unattainable joy, I felt down into the ground. Then I tried to walk away from the crowd, and for a miracle I was able to find a calm space. I felt down, I could not talk and walk; I felt that my soul penetrated into the side of Christ. There was not sadness in me, but a joy beyond words.”

tridimensional representation of Christ shows a different level of physicality and engagement.

In connection to the wooden crucifix in Bevagna, there is also an interesting story. Holy Giacomo da Bevagna, while praying in front of this Crucifix which he himself had commissioned and bought in Perugia, asked for a sign from Christ. He asked that the image bleed, as a sign that he would have reached eternal life. Right after his request the crucifix answered: "*Be this blood for you a sign and certainty*".⁸⁴ As soon as he finished talking, a stream of blood mixed with water squirted from the wooden crucifix toward the face and the cloak of Holy Giacomo da Bevagna.⁸⁵

As happened for Saint Angela da Foligno, the case of the Holy Giacomo da Bevagna shows a very visceral example of physical relationship with the sculpture. Even though it is true that hagiography tends to glorify the deeds of the characters involved, at the same time they use the social or physical context as a starting point for the events connected to the life of the holy person. In fact, there are still some sculptures of the animated crucified Christ preserved in which a vessel was connected to the chest wound and affixed to the back, and while the sculpture was in use, the wound was able to physically bleed.⁸⁶ **(Fig 17)**. This example, that could have been adopted very easily in Italy as well, is typical for this genre of sculpture. It

⁸⁴ Elvio Lunghi, "Ignoto Scultore Tedesco del XIII secolo – Crocifisso, Bevagna, San Domenico" in Bassetti, Massimiliano, and Bruno Toscano, *Dal Visibile all'Indicibile: Crocifissi ed Esperienza Mistica in Angela da Foligno*, (Spoleto: Fondazione Centro italiano di studi sull'alto Medioevo, 2012), 171.

⁸⁵ Kopania, *Animated Sculptures of Christ*, 170.

⁸⁶ Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 286.

marks the kind of physical dimension these wooden sculptures could have reached, and while impressing the beholder, they could affect and elicit mystical vision as well.

A further example is the case of Margherita da Cortona. She used to pray, according to the tradition, in front of a wooden crucifix of the typology of the *Crucifixi Dolorosi* (**Fig 18**) (known as mystical crucifixes as well).⁸⁷ The visions that she had in front of this crucifix trace out very carefully what occurred during a Passion Play, particularly the content of the *Laudario di Cortona*.⁸⁸

The Crucifixes in front of which Saint Angela of Foligno, the Holy Giacomo da Bevagna, or even Santa Margherita da Cortona experienced mystically, the physicality of Christ was not an animated sculpture of Christ, but the standard representation of Christ nailed to the cross.

The Tauberts supported the idea that animated sculptures of Christ, despite being in some case of excellent quality, are often of lower artistic relevance and not meant to be viewed through the year inside the churches. They argued that because of their movable nature during specific liturgies or paraliturgies, the sculptures

⁸⁷ Pavel Kalina, "Giovanni Pisano, the Dominicans, and the Origin of the Crucifixi Dolorosi". *Artibus Et Historiae*. (47), 2003, 81.

⁸⁸ Laura Corti and Riccardo Spinelli, *Margherita da Cortona: una Storia Emblematica di Devozione Narrata per Testi e Immagini* (Milano: Electa, 1998), 197-198. Anna Maria Maetzke, "Il Crocifisso detto di Santa Margherita, Un Crocifisso Gotico-Doloroso nella Città di Cortona" in *La Bellezza del Sacro: Sculture Medievali Policrome* (Arezzo: Centro Promozioni e Servizi, 2002), 61-65. Elvio Lunghi, *Mistici Umbri*, 151.

existed only for the reason of theatrical use.⁸⁹ Without a doubt, the possibility to move them and actually use them in specific ceremonies added a dimension of realism and dramatically affected the perception of these sculptures as the real body of Christ. If we consider that the iconography of both the animated sculptures of Christ and the Christ nailed to the Cross are the same, we can infer that bodily presence and their agency in representing Christ were the same. As a consequence, what we deduced for the animated sculpture of Christ, specifically for their essence, can be applied for the standard wooden crucifixion of Christ. In fact, these animated sculptures of Christ were actually displayed as altar crucifixes and used not only for specific occasion but also during the entire liturgical year. Animated sculptures of the crucified Christ are displayed in the main altar of both the churches of Santa Croce della Foce, which is also the headquarter of the local confraternity responsible for the Procession of the Dead Christ in Gubbio (**Fig 19**), and also the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Città di Castello (**Fig 20**).

Also, if we look at the case of the Saint Angela da Foligno more carefully ⁹⁰ she describes two situations: one inside the nave of a church during the celebrations

⁸⁹ Taubert, "Mittelalterliche Kruzifixe, 91, 113, 121. Kopenia, *Animated Sculptures*, 163.

⁹⁰ See note 75 on this chapter: *Libro dell'Esperienza*: "Una volta assistendo ai vespri guardavo la croce; e contemplando il Crocifisso con gli occhi del corpo, all'improvviso l'anima fu accesa da un solo amore, e tutte le membra del corpo sentirono una grande gioia. E vedevo e sentivo che Cristo dentro di me abbracciava l'anima con quell braccio che era stato inchiodato alla croce [...]. E mi diletto di guardar quella mano segnata dal chiodo, che egli mi apre mentre pronuncia queste parole: Ecco quell ache tenne su me per voi. [...] Per questa ragione, quando fu rappresentata la Passione di Cristo sulla piazza di Santa Maria (sarebbe stato un motivo da indurre al pianto), mi assalì tale content e mi rapì

of the Vespers, and the other on the public square in Foligno.⁹¹ While in the first setting or in a more private situation she had the mystical experience in front of a standard figure of Christ nailed on the cross (which could have been painted as well), as regards for the Passion Play in Foligno, she could have seen an animated sculpture of the crucified Christ (**Fig 21**). This strengthens the argument that the agency, presence, power, and resemblance with the real body of Christ of these animated sculptures of Christ and the figure nailed on the cross were comparable and proves how these objects had an especially visceral impact on the late medieval devotion. In both cases the experience of the crucified Christ was also enriched by the narration of the preacher, the songs, such as *Dulce Lignum Dulces Clavos* (Sweet wood sweet nails), or even a chorus by lay people⁹², at the same time the sculpture was at the center of these celebrations and the catalyst of these ceremonies throughout its physical essence. There are elements of both the liturgical and extralitururgical ceremonies that support the idea that the medieval understanding of these sculptures and the reception of their presence was the same as if the faithful were dealing with a real body, able at the same time to transcend the simple physicality of the object itself and become the metaphysical representation of Christ.

con tale piacere che persi la parolae, sotto il peso di quella gioia inenarrabile, caddi per terra. Allora cercai di allontanarmi dalla gente, e per grazia miracolosa riuscii ad appartarmi un poco. Caddi per terra, persi la parola e l'uso degli arti; mi parve allora che l'anima fosse penetrate dentro nel fianco di Cristo. Non c'era in me tristezza, ma gioia indescrivibile”.

⁹¹ Elvio Lunghi, “Mistici Umbri, 152.

⁹² Ibidem., 148.

A story that comes from a French *fabliau*, titled “Le prestre crucifié”, talks about a “sculptor (defined also as a maker of religious images) that comes back home and finds his wife with her priest-lover. The priest tried to flee and not being sure where to go so he takes off his clothes, mounts a cross, and hides among the crosses in the workroom. The husband meanwhile decides to inspect his recent creations and, astonished at the sloppiness of his work, trims what he delicately refers to as a bit of excess material”.⁹³ This grotesque situation of emasculation, undertaken in order to present and protect the virtue in God’s very body⁹⁴, is interesting in another aspect as well: beyond the action of the sculptor to shape the body of Christ through a naked body, a human model, is the inability to distinguish the real body of a man from one of a sculpture. Beyond the metaphorical aspect of the story and the ironic outcome is an understanding of the body and its representation which can be easily interchangeable and apparently unnoticeable between a wooden sculpture and a real man.

We can compare this situation to what happened in Perugia during the Passion Play on the main square in which a sculpture was substituted for an actor at the moment of the crucifixion, without altering or stopping the emotional and

⁹³ Quoted from: R. Howard Bloch, *The Scandal of the Fabliaux* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 61. Michael Camille, *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and Image-Making in Medieval Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 213. Marco Collareta, “Le Immagini e l’Arte. Riflessioni sulla Scultura Dipinta nelle Fonti Letterarie”, in *Scultura Lignea: Lucca 1200-1425*. Edited by Clara Baracchini (Firenze: Studio per edizioni scelte, 1995), 4.

⁹⁴ Camille, *The Gothic Idol*, 213.

devotional participation of the faithful. It shows, also, how the representations – in this case that of the body – were becoming more attentive to some details that in a way responded to the needs of a new kind of audience, moving towards the devotional needs of lay people, which often would not be served by the censorship of the Church.⁹⁵ In other words, the lifelike representation of Christ, embodied especially by these animated sculptures of the crucified Christ, responds viscerally to the needs of the devout; the aesthetic of these objects does not have to be sought simply in those classifications that belong to the official and canonical “art historical” development.

These sculptures need to be evaluated according to new and different categories which must also revise the unproductive dichotomy between popular and elite religion. Scholarship has begun to reject the idea of the existence of a precise division between clerical and lay, and also between popular and elite in favor of examining the existence of a more complex context that defines medieval culture.⁹⁶ However, these objects were linked to this separation, and the interpretation has consequently been distorted by religious, devotional, and

⁹⁵ Ibidem., 214.

⁹⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: an Essay on Religion in Late medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), 129. See also Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981. Peter Robert Lamont Brown, *The Cult of the Saints its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 13-22. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.01044>.

R. N. Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe, c.1215-c.1515*. (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 187.

theological prejudices. As David Morgan states in *Visual Piety*: “Unlike objects for disinterested or ‘aesthetic’ contemplation, designed to celebrate craft and the history of stylistic refinement, popular iconography is thoroughly ‘interested,’ ‘engaged,’ ‘functional,’ and extrinsically purposive.”⁹⁷ I would add that these sculptures have an aesthetic as well that cannot be classified as better-made or worse-made just for “admiration” and “contemplation”, but just classified differently. Obviously the engaging and functional aspects are very important, but these two do not eliminate or exclude, if we can use the same adjectives, admiration and contemplation. Actually, the more we pay attention to the dynamic associated with the use and existence of these objects, the more we find elements that need to be further explored to see their effect not only on devotion but also in art production and the experience of the sacred.

Overall, we can assert that there was a correlation between the animated sculptures and the standard figures of the crucified Christ. However, while the animated ones could have been accessible not only during the Holy Week but throughout the liturgical year, the standard sculptures of the crucified Christ were not used for specific rituals such as the *Depositio Crucis* or the *Entombment*. At the same time, in both cases their essence and appearance as the body of Christ would have functioned as a direct medium and mirror of the real human body. Because of

⁹⁷ Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 25.

this complex relationship, as well as in relation to the way these objects were displayed, used, and worshipped, they could have functioned as a vehicle which stimulated and framed the gestural expressiveness of the faithful. Since the representation of the characters in the Descent from the Cross, both the Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist were represented mourning over the death of Christ (**Fig 22**). Since their part of the Descent was not only an illustration of what happened, but a realistic presentation, of real people, a proposition of an historical fact that actually became the real moments of the Passion of Christ, first in virtue of the ceremonial and, later, the involvement of the people. The atmosphere created during these liturgical and also extralitururgical moments had an effect on the faithful that needs to be explored. Scholars associated the recitation of the *laude* with the pictorial production of the period, especially Cimabue's Crucifixion in the Basilica Superiore of Saint Francis in Assisi. Considering the dynamic of the ritual and the use of these sculptures, I argue that these celebrations were the most sensitive context in which the faithful shaped their sense of devotion. These celebrations provided the context of the real devotional experience.

Scholarship has underestimated the power of reenactment of these moments of the Passion of Christ and how this was concentrated and conceivable because of the sculptural medium of the wooden Descent from the Cross and the animated sculptures of Christ, which corroborated the diffusion of the standard figures of the

Crucified Christ and their moving toward a realism that only would later occur in painting.

One aspect that can improve the understanding of these sculptures is to go over the medium itself and see how it becomes the pull, the access and the point of orientation of how people experience the sacred space—or reality more generally, as well (influencing the pictorial production too). They allowed clergy first to materialize one of the pivotal moments of the Passion of Christ. Throughout their use and therefore the passage to the Christ with movable arms, they became not only a representation of these last moments of the earthly life of Christ, but a real appropriation in which the laity became more independent from the theological orthodoxy and also in the way that the laity made use of images, especially in the matter of space. As the anthropologist Clifford Geertz asserts: “In ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world.”⁹⁸ What was supposed to happen inside the church, in a very structured space and ritual, moves onto the church yard and around the city throughout the processions and oratory in which the laity gather. This implies an “extension” of the sacred space outside of the perimeter of the church and also a different sense of the accessibility of this space.

Another element that might be relevant to understanding how the space was

⁹⁸ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 112. Quoted also in note 200, Jung, *The Phenomenal Lives of Movable Christ Sculptures*, 79.

perceived and how these sculptures affected it, is the location in which these objects were displayed inside the church. Nowadays, it is almost impossible to find out the original display of these sculptures because their general mobility and the rituals themselves changed over time. In some cases, there is some information that can reveal not only the position, but especially how these sculptures functioned and were perceived. John T. Paoletti, in his study "Wooden Sculpture in Italy as Sacral Presence" describes how the animated sculpture of the crucified Christ by Donatello **(Fig 23)** was placed on the floor or very close to it⁹⁹, providing, as a consequence, a further and more direct access to the body of Christ, while stimulating piety and deeper devotion¹⁰⁰. This was a situation outside of the ritual one, in which, especially for the rite of the *Depositio*, the sculpture was taken down from the cross and was displayed among the faithful before the moment of the burial. As we note, faithful were able to get close to these sculptures and develop a personal devotional relationship with them. This was an access to the sacred, to a space that was first reserved only for the clergy, to the body of Christ. Because of these rituals of the reenactment of the Passion of Christ and the tendency of representing these sculptures recreating the human form in a very immediate way, these sculptures were far away from any hint of ideal forms of the body, typical of the previous

⁹⁹ John T. Paoletti, "Wooden Sculpture in Italy as Sacral Presence". *Artibus Et Historiae*. 13 (26) 1992: 88.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibidem.*, 89.

classical Greek and Roman artistic culture. At the same time, there is something else that we need to note beyond just what we see in front of our eyes.

Chapter 4

The influence of wooden sculptures on the pictorial production of the period.

A fundamental aspect I wish to explore in order to reconsider the importance of the group of the Descent from the Cross and the use of the animated sculptures of the crucified Christ is the connection with the painted art production of the period. Analysis of the wooden sculptures is frequently concentrated on the iconographical aspects, while questions related to function were relegated—and downgraded—to the realm of popular piety, which added a negative connotation to the study of function. However, an attentive analysis of the rituality linked to the group of the Descent can open new interpretations and correlations between sculpture and painting production during the late Medieval period. In fact, the use of these wooden Descents from the Cross and their liturgical and paraliturgical functions could have affected the great pictorial achievements in painting at the end of the thirteenth and beginning of the fourteenth centuries, particularly the pictorial cycle in Assisi and Giotto's pictorial production in Padova.

Without entering into the debate of whether or not and to what extent Giotto was present in Assisi, we must acknowledge the development of a revolutionary naturalism in Assisi, which intended to create a space that moved the sensibility of the viewer and compelled them to be more involved in the presentation of the sacred scene. The decoration of the nave in the Upper Basilica in Assisi created a

space in which the figures represented were part of the scene, providing an illusion of reality. Among all the scenes of the life of Saint Francis, I would like to focus on two scenes; the first represents the miracle of the Nativity in Greccio **(Fig 1)**. The miracle of the Nativity that occurred in Greccio was a crucial moment not only in the life of Saint Francis but also in the art world; it affected art production as well as the understanding of the faithful's relationship with an art object. The celebration of the Nativity on Christmas night in 1223 was organized using full rounded sculptures.¹ The celebration itself, according to the life of Saint Francis written by Tommaso da Celano, took days of preparation with which the devoted assisted. Men and women joined the celebrations, and even an ox and an ass were brought to the scene. The intent was to recreate the same ambiance of the stable in Bethlehem in order to directly and strongly stimulate the faithful's emotions.² The stage of the Nativity followed the *Sacre Rappresentazioni*, and the organization of the sculptures and the faithful directly recalled rituals connected to the Descent from the Cross, particularly the willingness to live directly in the scene with sentiment and full participation.

While this human participation was developed and present while using sculptures, only at the beginning of the thirteenth century was it possible to find in painting what was happening in sculpture in the devotional context of the period. It

¹ Leonardo Olschki, *The Genius of Italy* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1949), 84.

² Rosenthal Erwin, "The Crib of Greccio and Franciscan Realism" in *The Art Bulletin*. 36 (1) 1954, 58.

would be difficult to prove a direct correlation between the liturgical and paraliturgical rituals surrounding the Descent from the Cross and the pictorial achievement of the beginning of the thirteenth century. However, we cannot deny that the naturalistic language adopted to represent the life of Saint Francis has the same sentimental dimension and intention of recreating the scene as the rituals surrounding the Descent from the Cross. There is a humanization of pictorial language that I suggest is the result of a religious sensibility developed around the production and use of wooden painted sculptures and the spreading of Franciscan piety during the thirteenth century.

In the *Verification of the Stigmata* (**Fig 2**), the friars stand around the body of Saint Francis. At the bottom of the work, a person verifies the stigmata in Saint Francis's body, while the crowd that is set around Saint Francis's body animates the scene. The person on the left who is facing away from the viewer serves as the connection between the crowd in the painting and the devotees. Ideally, according to the organization of the painting, the faithful in the church would have completed the circle around the body of Saint Francis and thus also participate in the scene. This naturalistic interpretation of the life of Saint Francis was an innovation that broke completely with the past and dramatically affected future art production. Giotto, in his work in the Scrovegni Chapel, elevated to perfection what was initiated in Assisi. One of the most famous paintings in the Scrovegni Chapel is *Lamentation Over the Dead Body of Christ* (**Fig 3**); this fresco is probably the most dramatic scene

that Giotto painted in the Chapel. The figures in the foreground, which we can only see from the back, further developed the naturalism and inclusion begun in Assisi, and added psychological and sympathetic components to the scene.

The frescos in the Scrovegni Chapel are acknowledged as medieval masterpieces in which Giotto applied his observation of the natural world through the pictorial medium. Though we do not know if Giotto had a role in choosing the subjects, we can infer that he adapted the scenes according to his own creativity.³ The point here is not to discuss Giotto's genius or his influence on subsequent art; what is crucial is to examine and discover if the existence and use of wooden sculptures affected or anticipated the achievements reached by the pictorial production at the end of the thirteenth and beginning of the fourteenth centuries.

In Assisi, the *Verification of the Stigmata* included a person that was portrayed from behind at the side of the painting. Though this representation was innovative, the artist did not reach the psychological potential that we experience as beholders of Giotto's *Lamentation*. In both cases, the figures portrayed from behind were meant to bring the witnesses into the space and, as a consequence, promote a direct participation in the death of Christ. The intent of both frescos of the *Lamentation* and the *Verification of the Stigmata* was to create a real dimension of

³ Bruce Cole, *Giotto and Florentine Painting, 1280-1375*, (New York: Harper & Row. 1976), 67. For more recent studies on the Scrovegni Chapel see: Giuseppe Basile, Francesca Flores D'Arcais, Angelo Rubino, and Istituto Centrale per Il Restauro, *Giotto : The Frescoes of the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua*. Milan : New York: Skira, 2002. Davide Banzato, Giovanna Baldissin Molli and Filippo Bertazzo, *The Scrovegni Chapel in Padua*. *Mirabilia Italiæ*; 13. Modena: F.C. Panini, 2005.

affective devotion and this was also an intent behind the use of wooden sculptures, especially the Descent from the Cross. The rituals of the Descent, either liturgical or paraliturgical, have particularly interesting similarities with the psychology and the naturalistic approach seen in Giotto's *Lamentation*. I argue that for representation of the *Lamentation* in the painting, the artist could have used one of these celebrations as an iconographical and emotional reference to set the scene in the Scrovegni Chapel.

The *Lamentation* features Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, characters we can also find in the wooden Descent. John the Evangelist and the Virgin Mary are also present along with the three Marys; the Virgin Mary is represented in the act of embracing Christ, at the peak of her maternal love and sorrow. This traces and ideally reflects the figure of the Virgin Mary that developed from the wooden Descent from the Cross and the *laude*, which stressed the humanity of her sorrow and her maternal role more than her sanctity. The setting of the scene can be compared to the ritual associated with the Descent from the Cross, in which the faithful gathered around the sculptures and subsequently the sculpture of the crucified Christ. Moreover, it is interesting that some of the extant examples of the Descent from the Cross have angels over the crucified Christ (**Fig 4**), so Giotto could have seen them as a part of the scenic apparatus for the Holy Friday celebrations and adapted them for his pictorial interpretation of the subject.

As I mentioned previously, the wooden Descent from the Cross stopped being produced at the end of the thirteenth century because the rituals surrounding it changed. However, this does not mean that the existing examples were no longer used, and what we have today is only a fraction of a larger production and diffusion of these sculptures. Thus, Giotto might have seen them at the peak of their use in conjunction with the *laude* and in the context of the *Sacre Rappresentazioni*. Both the *laude* and the *Sacre Rappresentazioni* were meant to have an emotional impact and induce the faithful to participate directly with the sacred scene. Giotto's fresco of the *Lamentation* had the same intention, and Giotto may have considered the rituals surrounding the wooden sculptures of the Descent in order to organize his scene. The fact that the viewer is invited to participate in the space follows the same accessibility that was inherent in the practices surrounding wooden sculptures. The person represented from behind was most likely a transposition of what Giotto could see as a spectator in one of these celebrations, in which the space was not divided or set frontally but rather embraced physically and emotionally by the whole community.

Another element that supports this hypothesis is that the most interesting extant examples of the ritual of the *Depositio* come from Florence and Padova. These rituals included a procession with a coffin, and while in Florence a sculpture of the dead Christ was most likely used, in Padova—according to the regional usage

in Veneto—the Eucharist was utilized for the burial.⁴ There are still documents from the thirteenth century that carefully describe the organization of the Holy Friday procession in Padova. It is peculiar for its theatricality, in which strong attention is paid to the death and the mourning of Christ through the lamentations.⁵ The detailed description of the organization of the procession shows how the clerics gathered in Church Cathedrals to prepare a catafalque in which to position the “body of our Lord Jesus Christ.” According to the Veneto regional tradition, this could refer to the host, intended as the *body of Christ*. Yet since four *Mansionari* (guardians) were assigned to carry the catafalque that contained the body of Christ, it is reasonable that a sculpture could have been used for the procession and following parts of the rituals. The priests would then kneel around the coffin, while two would start the *Lamentation*, screaming *Ahimè, Ahimè*, and using gestures apt for the dramatic situation.⁶ After these initial moments of mourning, the priests would invite the faithful with specific gestures to participate and mourn over the body of Christ.

The ritual and the use of gesture in accordance with the *Lamentations* closely recalls the psychological dynamic of Giotto’s fresco *Lamentation Over the Dead Body of Christ*. The various gestures, the gathering around the body of Christ, the

⁴ Claudio Bernardi, *Deposizioni e Annunciazioni*, 79.

⁵ *Liber Ordinarius della Chiesa Padovana*, Codice Mebranaceo Conservato nella Biblioteca Capitolare di Padova, del Secolo XII as quoted in Giuseppe Vecchi, *Uffici Drammatici Padovani* (Firenze: L.S. Olschki, 1954), 133.

⁶ *Ibidem.*, 133.

screaming, and the invitation for the viewer to participate in the scene all mirror the ritual that occurred in Padova before Giotto painted the Scrovegni Chapel. This scene by Giotto is one of the strongest and most impressive in providing a broad spectrum of grief, particularly how the figures are present both physically and psychologically. Since this ritual was strong and well organized in Padova, it is important to consider the relationship between the two, particularly how the real ritual could have affected the painted version.

In a broader perspective, Giotto might have also been exposed to the Holy Friday ritual when he was in Florence, where a sculpture would have been more likely used than the host. The composition and stress placed on emotional aspects of the scene seem to trace directly back to the real ritual. A passage in the *Lamentations* about the Holy Friday celebrations reads: “Sediamoci a terra e piangiamo, perchè non taccia la pupilla dei nostril occhi. Gridiamo con parole e lacrime: Ahaimè, ahimè Signore.”⁷ This direct invitation to sit and cry beside the body of Christ corresponds with two of the most powerful and enigmatic figures of Giotto’s painting, those sitting in the foreground by the body of Christ assisting closely in the drama of the Virgin Mary. These literary sources, the use of sculptures, and the “theatrical” approach in the liturgical and extraliturgical rituals, all of which emphasize the emotional dimension that affected devotees and involved them

⁷ Ibidem., 141. “Let’s sit on the ground and cry, without stopping the tears from our eyes. Let’s scream with words and tears: Ahaimè, ahimè, O Lord”

directly, constitute a need to consider the achievement reached in painting as a result of the devotional dimension developed in the liturgy while using wooden sculptures.

The fact that his fresco presents two people portrayed from behind shows how Giotto used the pictorial space as a “ritual” space, to which not only the clergy but also the faithful had access. Additionally, this access was not presented simply in a frontal way, but the faithful are instead able to gather and see the scene from different perspectives. The idea here is not to celebrate Giotto’s ability and mastery of the pictorial medium and its break from the Byzantine artistic culture or its effect on the development of art during the Renaissance. Instead, the idea is to consider how his pictorial achievements were not only a result of representing spatial depth or body masses, but also a result of this new sensibility toward the understanding and representation of sacred space and sacred scenes, particularly those promoted and developed by the use of wooden sculptures and rituals linked to the Descent from the Cross.

Painting is frequently considered the medium that was most able to synthesize the narrative, the sacred scenes, and the liturgy through the visual idiom while also providing a truthful idea of reality that was accessible to everyone. Sculpture, however, is often the medium associated with the liturgy, yet this lacks recognition of its artistic value and ability to influence other mediums such as painting. We should consider that one of the predominant achievements reached by

Giotto in the Scrovegni Chapel was his organization of the scenes in a way that the viewer is introduced into the virtual space of the fresco and becomes a part of it. This artistically innovative invitation into the pictorial space, which without a doubt affected the subsequent development of Western painting, is often considered as within the pictorial realm, with Byzantine production from the East or West as a counterpart. I do not call this concept into question; instead, I'd like to note that these stimulating sculptures also promoted the spatial and visual sensibility that is identifiable in the conceptual advancement of painting production. Considering sculpture's natural ability to divide and be a real presence in the space and, especially in this period, to directly involve the faithful through liturgical or paraliturgical celebrations, sculpture cannot be excluded from this new devotional dimension that was developing during the thirteenth century. Especially if we consider that this dramatic representation of the liturgy, which utilized direct involvement of the faithful as well as sculptures, we can see that sculptures provided an important example of accessing the sacred before this concept occurred in painting.

The liturgical and devotional roles of the wooden Descent from the Cross and its connection with devotional society of the thirteenth century provide the basis for this study. The production and use of the wooden Descent from the Cross and its future developments—the subject of the following chapter—are at the core of the religious mindset and artistic achievements of the thirteenth century. Too often

these sculptures have been relegated as devotional objects, hence the medium was not a way to understand them but instead a means by which to judge them with prejudice. However, we must look beyond these established ideas about the wooden Descent from the Cross in order to investigate their purpose, their function, and their real artistic value.

The wooden Descents from the Cross were not simple interpretations of a particular moment of the Passion of Christ, a moment it was possible to experience in paintings and small devotional objects as well. These wooden groups were instead designed to provide access to the divine; alongside the *laude* and within the context of *Sacre Rappresentazione*, they had the power to provide *real* access to the sacred space and the humanity of Christ. Their use was not limited to the liturgical or extraliturgical context; they created a mentality and sensibility toward a way of living the sacred during the thirteenth century that also affected later pictorial production. The Descent from the Cross provided the first step toward enabling the faithful to access the real humanity and body of Christ, overcoming the monastic-style liturgy that was usually removed and distant from the faithful. The stress placed on the Virgin Mary and her sorrow as a mother assisting in the martyrdom and death of her child forged another situation in which the laity experienced an unmediated relationship with the sacred. The presence of the sculpture of the Virgin Mary in the group of the Descent allowed the faithful to identify with her and rendered her presence alive and real rather than only symbolic or abstract.

The wooden Descent from the Cross presents a pivotal transition. The understanding and use of images as mnemonic devices are able to document sacred events. Since this enabled illiterates to comprehend biblical texts through a pictorial medium,⁸ there is a passage of true access to both the sacred space and the sacred scene. Particularly through contact with the real body of Christ, sculpture became the medium through which to live and fully participate in the Passion of Christ.

This dynamic that involves the access and the direct experience of the sacred space and the sacred scene, I argue that can be considered also in other aspects that can contribute to the comprehension of the pictorial production of the late Medieval period and early Renaissance. Specifically, the wooden sculptures, utilized and displayed both inside and outside the churches, created the visual circumstances for some elements which were later applied in painting.

For example, in the *Descent from the Cross* (1320 ca.) by Simone Martini (**Fig 5**), there is a scene featuring the Passion of Christ, in which a cardinal from the Roman Orsini family⁹ is visible at the bottom of the cross. The cardinal is tiny in comparison to the other characters that are assisting in the Descent from the Cross, illustrating the hierarchy of differing proportions which was conventional during

⁸ See Acta Synodi Atrebatensis, XIV, Migne, P.L. 142:1306 as quoted in Herbert Kessler, "Diction in the 'Bibles of Illiterate'" in *World Art: Themes of Unity in Diversity : Acts of the XXVith International Congress of the History of Art*. (University Park [Pa.]: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 300. As quoted in Steve B Choate "Devotion and Narrative within the Tradition of the Croce Dipinta" (PhD diss., Florida State University), 187.

⁹ H. W. van Os, *The Art of Devotion in the Late Middle Ages in Europe, 1300-1500*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 78.

pictorial production of the late Medieval period. Another example is the *Lamentation* (1365) by Giotto (Fig 6). This painting follows the same structure as Giotto's work even if the demonstration of sorrow is more contained than the *Lamentation* in the Scrovegni Chapel. What is peculiar in this case is the presence in the *Lamentation* scene not only of other Saints who were certainly not part of the original event, but also the presence of two patrons: a Dominican nun and a wealthy, as indicated by her clothing, young woman (Fig 7). In both cases there are "contemporary persons" assisting the original events relative to the Passion of Christ.

Scholars agree in considering of Byzantine origin the iconographical scheme of representing somebody, a real person that recommends himself to the divinity.¹⁰ The idea to show a more direct connection with the divine was provided by the use of ritual gestures such as the act of bowing (*proskynesis*), however, while this gesture referred more to an act of submission, the way of representing the donor while bowing in front of the divinity indicated dedication and adoration.¹¹ Overall, the idea of representing a donor or a benefactor in the act of his donation in order to get close to the divinity was not new and since the Romans continued through the

¹⁰ Michele Bacci, *Pro remedio animae: immagini sacre e pratiche devozionali in Italia centrale : secoli XIII e XIV*. (Pisa: GISEM, 2000), 403. See also Corine Schleif, "Hands that Appoint, Anoint and Ally: Late Medieval Donors Strategies for Appropriating Approbation Through Painting" in *Art History*, 16 (1), (1993), 1-32.

¹¹ *Ibidem.*, 405.

Middle Ages¹² (obviously adapting itself to the specific context and necessity of the period).

However, I argue that the presence of the donor or an important person in a sacred scene, especially those that concern the Passion of Christ such as the Crucifixion, the Descent from the Cross and the Lamentation, is the result of the new religious context of the thirteenth century and the use of the sculptures for devotional purposes greatly affected the perception and representation of both the sacred scene and the lay people in it.

One of the most interesting representations of a contemporary person in the context of a sacred scene is Saint Francis in the Crucifixion by Cimabue in the Basilica Superiore of Saint Francis in Assisi (**Fig 8**). Saint Francis is portrayed kneeling at the bottom of the cross, and despite the photographic effect which has inverted the lights and darks, we can clearly identify the scene and distinctly recognize Saint Francis' stigmata, as well as his personal physical experience of the Passion of Christ. This scene was represented in the right side of the transept, visible to the friars seated in the choir of Saint Francis. This image works in connection with the other crucifixion that is on the left side of the transept, also visible from the choir of Saint Francis (**Fig 9**). Now, it is not my intention to compare the two Crucifixions, and I am well aware of Cimabue's innovation and powerful capacity to represent emotions. As I mentioned before, this specific fresco has also

¹² Ibidem., 402.

been considered as a counterpart of the literary texts of *laude* production of Middle Ages.

For the purposes of my analysis, however, there are some additional aspects of the work that need to be considered. First of all, the presence of Saint Francis is not represented as a vision that he is having. Rather, he “reaches through time to participate in the actual history of the Crucifixion.”¹³ It is important to note that Saint Francis is portrayed in the Crucifixion in which Christ is already dead and the witnesses are mourning for his death. He is not part of the other crucifixion, in which the soldier is piercing the body of Christ, where there is still an ongoing action even if very close to the end of Christ’s earthly life.

Obviously, we can ascribe Saint Francis’ presence and interpretation of the scene to the artistic talent of Cimabue, but I would argue that this is not the only factor. In fact, the moment of the death of Christ is the peak of his humanity and, as a consequence, of his accessibility. It is the moment represented in these rituals by a wooden sculpture, in which the clergy, first, and the lay people later, would access the body of Christ. As Paoletti mentions, specifically referring to the Cimabue’s painting, Saint Francis was not having a vision, but was “participating in the actual history of the Crucifixion”. This can be directly related to the power of the reenactment of those celebrations of the Passion of Christ in which, during the

¹³ John T. Paoletti, “Wooden Sculpture in Italy as Sacral Presence,” in *Artibus et Historiae*, vol 13, no 26 (1992): 92.

ritual, the present and the past historical moment would transcend into the same reality involving the participants emotionally and physically. I would argue that what we admire in Cimabue is an interpretation of the rituals connected to the Passion of Christ and a pictorial translation of them in which wooden sculptures were used to activate an emotional and physical reaction--demonstrating how the *laude* were more connected to these functions, as opposed to simply being just a literary transposition of the pictorial images. These rituals, either liturgical or extralitururgical, were the context of and the filter for the creation and understanding of devotional paintings, not the other way around; the latter analysis totally dismisses the use, the presence, and the agency of wooden sculptures.

Another example demonstrating why such dismissal is an error is the *Crucifixion* by the Maestro Espressionista, now in the Church of Sant'Andrea in Spello (Umbria) (**Fig 10**). In this painted cross, Saint Francis is portrayed at the bottom of the cross, at the feet of Christ, soliciting a devotional and special contact with the body of Christ. While promoting the closeness of Saint Francis to Christ and his bodily experience of the Passion, beyond the stigmata, this image stimulates emulation: it pushes the faithful to have a direct relationship with the body of Christ. While it was not possible for the faithful to experience the stigmata directly on their body, they were able to re-experience the suffering of Christ to some extent through self flagellation scouring themselves at public gatherings or in oratories, but as far as the real access to the body of Christ is concerned, the capacity to share and feel

his presence would have been provided by the use of a wooden sculpture. The fact that we find Saint Francis first and then other lay patrons portrayed in the sacred scene follows the same path of development as the rituals in which wooden sculptures were used.

Initially, these sculptures were used inside of the church mostly by the clergy, while the faithful attended at a distance. While promoting a more effective participation, and while the cult of the body of Christ was rising in the Medieval period, we identify an access of the lay people to the sacred. As noted above, the rituals first shifted to incorporate the substitution of people for the characters of the Descent from the Cross, after which came the transition to the animated sculpture of the crucified Christ, which promoted not only realism in the reenactment of the Passion but especially direct access to his body and to the sacred, which had previously been the sole domain of the clergy.

The same progression occurred in painting, as the *Descent from the Cross* (1320 ca.) by Simone Martini and the *Lamentation* (1365) by Giotto demonstrate. Both cases respect the hierarchy of proportions noted in the paintings featuring Saint Francis, but at the same time we can see them as a part of a sacred scene, assisting but also participating. In fact, I would not consider the representation of these donors as passive, merely a devotional presence for private devotion. I would argue, instead, that their presence reflects their participation in the rituals of the Holy Week and illustrates the way in which painting would become the medium that

proves this devotional realm. Seeing these donors in painting was accepted precisely because it was normal to see them participating in these rituals. If we look at the dates of these paintings, we see that they come in the wake of the wide diffusion of the production and utilization of the animated sculptures of the crucified Christ once both clergy and laity were already part of the sacred scene, close to the body of Christ and to the sacred event as a reality of the time period.

The laity's appropriation of the sacred space and participation in events belonging to the life of Christ in another time, as facilitated by the rituality connected with the use of the wooden sculptures, now become observable in painting. In general, and more specifically for the Middle Ages, devotional art has been considered to be standard and repetitive; within this understanding, inserting the figure of the patrons kneeling in front of the sacred scene and in smaller size is simply a matter of convention. I argue that these are, in fact, the first examples of representation of a contemporary reality, even though this nascent representation works through some standard conventions of the Medieval period, such as the hierarchy of proportions or the golden background. By "contemporary reality" I mean scenes that would have occurred during the rituals linked to the celebrations of the Holy Week, in which clergy, as in the case of the Cardinal Romano Orsini, or nuns or wealthy people, such as the persons represented in Giotto's *Lamentation*, were present and actively participated in these liturgical moments. The choral participation by the clergy and the laity in these events was so well established and

normal that we can consider their representation and inclusion in painting not as novelty or an original anticipation of the pictorial medium, but as a visual transposition of the sacred reality recreated during the liturgies of the Holy Week. As a consequence, the presence of the contemporary clergy and lay people in the representation of sacred scenes in the paintings was already socially established because of the diffusion and social impact of these rituals during the Holy Week. Painting becomes the medium that interprets this meta-reality, a world in which past and present, sacred and secular becomes one entity, while the sculpture, once activated, is the center around which everything turns.

At the same time, it would be reductive to consider these sculptures and their power only during the liturgy of the Holy Week. In actuality, wooden sculptures had a more sophisticated and affective role than scholars have ever considered. Beyond their utilization and activation during the rituals of the Holy Week, these sculptures had the role of embodying the presence of Christ, stimulating an affective piety that creates a permanent awareness of his existence and presence. For example, the painting by Giovanni di Paolo, *Levitation of an Unknown Franciscan Monk* (**Fig 11**), shows a miraculous moment in front of what can identify as a life-size polychrome wooden crucifix showing, despite some pictorial conventions, an actual crucified Christ in front of the monk.¹⁴ This suggests, as I highlighted before, that in the case

¹⁴ Paoletti, "Wooden Sculpture, 89. The pictorial representation of wooden sculptures in painting will be also the focus of the next chapter of this study.

of Donatello's wooden crucifix, the sculpture was placed on the ground floor, so this shows how life sized wooden sculptures of Christ would have been viewed in the fourteenth and fifteenth century.¹⁵ This indicates that the beholder and faithful's awareness of the sacred space and his/her devotional experience would have also been determined by the access to these sculptures outside of the moments in which they were activated. We can assert more generally that these wooden sculptures worked as the real presence of Christ, beyond their specific function in ritual moments, and also as an effective mediator of the sacred.

Their compelling verism and this close relationship with the faithful is what determined the nature of access to and the presence of the beholder in the sacred scene, and this is what allowed the documentation of this religious experience throughout the pictorial medium. This is also demonstrated by another example of the presence of the donor in a holy scene: the *Crucifixion* (1400-1405) by Giovanni di Pietro da Napoli (**Fig 12**). In this *Crucifixion*, the Virgin Mary, John the Evangelist, and Saint Francis are portrayed kneeling and embracing the cross, and two donors kneel like Saint Francis at the bottom of the cross. The figure of Saint Francis embracing the feet of Christ follows the iconography of the painted cross, in which Saint Francis was portrayed at the bottom of the cross by the feet of Christ, not life-size as in this case, but in small size, respecting the medieval conventions of proportions. However, in this case he is represented life-size, while the donors are

¹⁵ Ibid., 89.

portrayed in smaller dimension. What is interesting is that Saint Francis is proposing a physical relationship with Christ, making the painted cross not just a representation, but a corporal presence. As a consequence, the presence of the donors can be read as their presence in front of the true body of the crucified Christ. In order to read the image in this way, the donor must have experienced this emotional and devotional relationship in front of a wooden sculpted crucifix. The painting becomes the transposition of their direct devotional experience in front of a wooden cross, and the presence of the Virgin Mary, John the Evangelist and, in this case, Saint Francis as well, is the combination of two devotional worlds: the educational and the spiritual in which a sacred scene and holy persons are illustrated, and the realistic one in which the actual act of devotion is represented.

I argue that from the beginning of the fourteenth century devotional painted images (even if they cannot be generalized) became the medium that described the development of popular devotion and its process of individualization and shifting relationship with Christ (and the devotional object through which he is represented). Painted images visualized what was occurring in the religious context of the period, and I argue that in some cases we can approach painted images as sort of documentary of the current devotional context in which the beholder could recognize scenes that he/she assisted, participated, and lived. As a consequence, the representation of the scene of the Crucifixion or the Descent from the Cross was not

only a visualization of one of the moments of the life of Christ, but rather a depiction of the reenactment and the participation of the faithful to the sacred scene.

There are other examples that can illustrate this closeness to the body of Christ, such as the fresco in the Chapel of Ciuccio Tarlati by the Maestro del Vescovado, painted in the Cathedral of Arezzo around the middle of the fourteenth century (**Fig 13**). In this representation of the Crucifixion, the Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist are right beside the cross, and Saint Michael the Archangel and Saint Francis are at their side. Kneeling right at the bottom of the cross is the donor Ciuccio di Vanni Tarlati di Pietramala, dressed as knight. Even in this case there is the customary use of the medieval artistic convention of the hierarchy of proportion, but there is also another interesting aspect that needs to be highlighted. This chapel is a funerary monument. In fact, at the bottom of the fresco there is the tomb of Ciuccio Tarlati (1334). While it was becoming common during the fourteenth century to build funerary monuments of lay people inside the church, such as the funerary monument of Cino da Pistoia (died in 1337), which was represented while he is still teaching (**Fig 14**) and realized in the Duomo of Pistoia, I would argue that the addition of the fresco with the crucifixion and saints goes beyond the simple donor portrait within a sacred scene. I argue that even this painting is a representation of a real scene and the relationship itself between the donor and the body of Christ. The fact that Saint John, while mourning, points at Ciuccio Tarlati kneeling by the cross and the *body* of Christ, suggests that he would

have been recognized in this position. Obviously, there is a celebratory element and an elevation of Ciuccio Tarlati that also involves a political dimension, but what I am discussing here, specifically, is that the origin and understanding of this fresco comes from an element of reality. The presence of Ciuccio Tarlati in this fresco reflects the presence of Tarlati in front of a real sculpture inside the church. This fresco also shows another process that was occurring during this period in the Late Middle Ages. There is not only the funerary monument inside the church, but the physical presence and representation of Ciuccio Tarlati close to the body of Christ in the act of devotion that must be seen as an action, and not as a symbol.

It is true that in paintings we find mostly wealthy and socially important people, for example the *Crucifixion* by the Maestro delle Tempere francescane (**Fig 15**). The *Crucifixion* painted around 1336 in Naples depicts Christ crucified while a rich stream of blood reaches both the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene. On the right side of the Cross, between the Christ and Saint John, there are King Robert of Anjou and his wife, Queen Sancia,¹⁶ kneeling in front of the body of Christ.

Frescos like this one would have fallen into the category of devotional art, the self-representation, or portraiture during the Medieval period, or even into the classification of the medieval visual experience of the divine. One discussion of the study of images in which real characters started to be portrayed, whether in fresco or in illuminated manuscripts, such as books of hours, says, “audiences were coming

¹⁶ Enrico Castelnuovo, *La Pittura in Italia* (Milano: Electa, 1986), vol II, 613.

to accept the claim that images could serve as fundamentally trustworthy records of the appearance of important figures. In some senses, the assumption that many images constituted corporeal likeness of their subject had become a priori interpretive move in the minds of audiences.”¹⁷ My question is where is the origin of this “a priori interpretive move in the minds of the audience”?

In fact, also based on the theoretical speculation about vision and the experience of the sacred, the ecclesiastical institution (and scholarship) relied on those concepts that tried to explain the relations and the fusion between the visible and invisible world. One of the most influential contributions on the matter was the writing of Saint Augustine: “It is not necessary for us to be represented as or assimilated to the appearance of another and because of this to be false in order to be true in our own appearance. We must seek that which is true, and not something which presents two faces which contradict one another so that it might be true on the one hand and false on the other.”¹⁸

Scholarship that has dealt with portraiture or the representation of the owner of the book of hours during the Medieval period has focused, again, primarily on the pictorial medium and on the role and rank of the person portrayed and their personal awareness in front of the sacred image. For example, in the Psalter-Hours of Yolande de Soissons there is an image in which the owner of the books is

¹⁷ Stephen Perkinson, *The Likeness of the King: a Prehistory of Portraiture in Late Medieval France* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 83.

¹⁸ Gerard Watson, and Augustine. *Soliloquies ; and, Immortality of the Soul* (Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips, 1990), 97.

portrayed in act of prayer in front of an image of the Virgin and Child placed over an altar **(Fig 16)**. This image could have worked as polychrome wooden sculpture, a divinely activated object, and even an apparition from heaven.¹⁹ While the study focuses on the “reflection and reflexivity to the visual culture of devotion toward the end of the thirteenth century,”²⁰ once, again, we must ask where is the origin and source devotionally, culturally, and in this case also visually that allowed this awareness on the part of the viewer, this consciousness toward the sacred image, and, for the artist, the “iconographic” reference?

I believe that for this case, the visual source of these representations for the book of hours comes from the ritual in which, specifically for the image above mentioned, polychrome wooden sculptures of the Virgin Mary and child were used. These books were adapted to new owners once the previous one was deceased, and their purpose changed according to the spiritual need of the new holder.²¹ This shows even more strongly the connection with the contemporary devotional practices and the initial necessity to rely on the gestures linked to the devotional practice or the rituals instead of the physiognomic of the person.

The diffusion of this sensibility subject was widespread even in painting, and this demonstrates the role and importance of the wooden sculptures of the Virgin Mary and child **(Fig 17)** for the medieval devotion and the visual source for these

¹⁹ Alexa Kristen Sand, *Vision, Devotion, and Self-Representation in Late Medieval Art* (New York : Cambridge University Press, 2014), 5.

²⁰ *Ibidem.*, 5.

²¹ *Ibidem.*, 6.

kind of paintings as well (**Fig 18**). Obviously I do not want to generalize and apply to all devotional paintings the same relationship with the devotional context in which wooden sculptures were used, and I do not mean to support the idea that what is happening with the animated sculptures of the crucified Christ (which is the main subject of this study) is occurring in direct correspondence with the wooden sculptures of the Virgin and Child. Rather, the point is that we need to look at the use and the role of these sculptures during the thirteenth and fourteenth century and how they affected the piety in Italy, the relationship with the sacred, and as a consequence, the representation of this piety.

Donor images have long been objects of study by art historians who saw a political gesture within a fresco or a wooden panel painting. This gesture was a position that affected the determination and economic status of the gender.²² There are different situations in which donors have been portrayed but insofar as their representation in sacred scenes is concerned, I assert that their presence in these kind of paintings since the late Medieval period comes from this process of participation in the liturgy in which these sculptures were used, and from the consequent appropriation of the sacred space by the laity in general. One particularly useful document in considering this discusses how Alfonso V of Aragon,

²² Corine Schleif, "Kneeling on the threshold: donors negotiating realms betwixt and between" in *Thresholds of Medieval Visual Culture: Liminal Spaces*, ed Elina Gertsman and Jill Stevenson. (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2012), 196. See also from the same author Corine Schleif, "Hands that Appoint, Anoint, and Ally: Late-Medieval Donors Strategies for Appropriating Approbation through Painitng" in *Art History*, 16 (1993), 1-33.

known as Alfonso I, King of Naples, participated in the liturgical drama that reenacted the Deposition and Burial of Christ on April 13, 1437 during Good Friday.²³ This document demonstrates the actual participation in these liturgies of a person of the rank of king and opens some considerations. First of all, even if the active participation of a king to the rite of the Holy Week can be seen as an incursion of a secular person into the sacred space, and as a consequence the political realm entering through the liturgy into the physical space of the church,²⁴ we cannot underestimate the power of this liturgy. If even a king decided to be part of it, beyond the real motivations (either principally devotional or political) this underlines the power of these celebrations and what kind of impact they must have had upon the society of the period. Second, the fact that a king took part in person during these rites shows that they were not something that was entirely relegated and proper to the lower class of the society. On the contrary, being part of these ceremonials would have enhanced the position of those who were involved, becoming part of the sacredness embodied and released by the wooden sculptures that were used during this rite.

Because of this document that attests to the participation of a king in the rituals of the Holy Week, it is possible to support the idea that the closeness of wealthy donors to the sacred scenes, represented in painting, was derived from a

²³ Solange Corbin, *La Deposition Liturgique du Christ au Vendredi Saint; sa Place dans l'Histoire des Rites et du Théâtre Religieux (analyse de documents portugais)*. (Paris: Société d'éditions "Les Belles Lettres", 1960), 257. Paoletti, "Wooden Sculpture, 92.

²⁴ Paoletti, *Wooden Sculpture*, 92.

real devotional situation. Not only was the private devotion or personal will of the donors portrayed, but also a realistic moment that was socially and publicly defined. According to Glenn Ehrstine, “[...] medieval spectatorship was inherently kinesthetic, with audience reception of religious theater predominantly occurring, with occasional exceptions, within the context of devotional practices involving bodily sensation. Through such kinesthesia, the body itself became an avenue for audience participation, augmenting other modes of reception, such as the play’s affective elicitation of *compassio*”.²⁵ Thus, medieval spectatorship blurred the boundaries between public and private devotion by involving the use of sacred space for both personal and private devotion, the use of the body for the purposes of interaction with the re-presentation of the sacred scene, and, also, the beholder’s affective participation in and response to the moments of the Passion of Christ and the use of animated sculptures.²⁶ The sources of Ehrstine’s study were three devotional texts: the *Vita Christi* of Ludolph of Saxony written in the mid fourteenth century, *Do der minnenklich got* (When Loving God), an anonymous German tract from the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, and *Der Berg des schowenden lebens* (The Mount of Contemplative life) by Johann Geiler von Kayserberg,²⁷ written in the second half of the fifteenth century. This study, in addition to those I’ve

²⁵ Glenn Ehrstine, “Passion Spectatorship Between Private and Public Devotion” in *Thresholds of Medieval Visual Culture: Liminal Spaces*, ed Elina Gertsman and Jill Stevenson. (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2012), 304.

²⁶ *Ibidem.*, 305.

²⁷ *Ibidem.*, 305

already discussed, establishes the kinesthetic and sensorial devotional experience, the duality of devotion between private and public, the body positions in order to experience visually the Passion, the preparation of being engaged in front of Christ's representation and also the remembrance of the action once the play was over, using literary sources, an approach which overlooks completely the physical activator of these rituals, that is the sculptures. While Glenn Ehrstine mentions that it was not unusual in the late Medieval period to assist to public representation of the Passion, at the same time she has doubts regarding viewing conditions and how they may have affected devotional reception.²⁸

Given that most of these medieval devotional texts were written, at the earliest, in the first half of the fourteenth century, it becomes necessary to acknowledge that the elaboration of those visual concepts part of these devotional texts was made subsequent to the diffusion and the use of the animated sculptures of the crucified Christ. Further, the texts in question portrayed a marked corporeal aspect of the experience of the Passion that cannot be underestimated and must eventually be readdressed in terms of the context of the development of the rituals with which the texts are paired. This corporeal dimension is manifested in *The Vita Christi* of Ludolph of Saxony, which mentions how to use the imagination to empathize with the events that happened during the last moments of the life of Christ: "If you wish to reap the fruit of your meditations, [...] then you must make

²⁸ Ibidem., 308.

yourself present at what was said or done by Christ the Lord or what is told about it, as if you heard it with your own ears or saw it with your own eyes [...]. And thus, although many of these things are told as in the past, you should meditate on all of them as if they were in the present; because without doubt you will taste a greater pleasantness from this. Therefore, read about what was done as if it were being done. Place before your eyes past actions as if they were present, and thus to a great extent, you will taste things as more savory and delightful".²⁹

The directions provided by Ludolph of Saxony clearly advocate using one's mind to placing oneself physically into those moments in which Christ lived his Passion. The striking part of this way of meditating over the Passion of Christ is that it seems to accurately follow the action of the liturgical or paraliturgical rites. Examining the illuminated version of the devotional book written by Ludolph of Saxony, it becomes impossible to avoid acknowledging that in Volume 1 and Folio 1 **(Fig 19)** the monk is praying while visualizing the real body of Christ, which can be linked to a contemporary wooden sculptures, along with some instruments used during the Passion.

Study of medieval theater puts in question the idea that the use of devotional books and passion plays were two distinct worlds, one belonging to the private and the other one to the public sphere, supporting the case that devotional books could

²⁹ Charles Abbott Conway, *The Vita Christi of Ludolph of Saxony and Late Medieval Devotion Centered on the Incarnation: a Descriptive Analysis*, *Analecta Cartusiana* 34 (Salzburg, Austria, 1976), 123. Cited after Glenn Ehrstine, *Passion Spectatorship*, 312.

have practically affected the organization and presentation of Passion Plays.³⁰ I argue that the rituals connected to the Passion of Christ, both liturgical or paraliturgical celebrations, along with the use of wooden sculptures were the catalyst of the production of these devotional books. This revised pattern of influence is born out by one of the first influential devotional book from which other devotional treatises derived, the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, written in the middle of the fourteenth century by the Pseudo-Bonaventure. The book was written in a period when the ritual and the relationship with these rites were already established and also when the production and diffusion of animated wooden sculptures of the Crucified Christ were already popular and in use. Obviously, it is not appropriate to generalize and apply this statement to every single situation, but what I am referring to is the clear need to recognize that the faithful recognized the wooden sculpture as the bodily presence of Christ and as the direct medium for their relationship with the human side of Christ (which certainly includes the regular wooden sculptures of the crucified Christ that are experienced as tangibly as as possible, as suggested by Ludolph of Saxony). These wooden sculptures represented and embodied the real body of Christ. While this could have applied only once they were activated, it seems more likely that the faithful would acknowledge this role of the sculpture during the whole liturgical year, and that both the sculptures and the rituals around it had a pivotal role in affecting and

³⁰ Glenn Ehrstine, *Passion Spectatorship*, 303.

shaping the devotion (and the representation of it) during the fourteenth and fifteenth century.

The objects are thus unable to play an active role in affecting other aspects of the devotional society of central Italy during the late Medieval period and the beginning of the Renaissance. Being more attentive to the dynamic of the development of the devotion during the late Medieval period, however, reveals several connections which could justify some aesthetic choices and ways of representing the sacred scene at the beginning of the Renaissance.

For example, one of the most famous frescos of the fifteenth century is Masaccio's *Trinity* (**Fig 20**). This fresco admirably combines the representation of a subject that is specific to the Christian faith and the theology of the Trinity with the application of the new perspective techniques in such excellent way as to provide the effect of a real gallery behind the subject in the fresco. This fresco has been interpreted as a reference to the Chapel of the Golgotha, from a medieval tradition, with the representation of the Adam's tomb at the bottom and the crucifixion of Christ in the middle part, a product of the commission and activity of the Dominican community that had been established in Florence since 1219.³¹ The center of this fresco features the crucifixion of Christ, better described as the so-called Throne of Mercy, raising an important theological element to consider: Masaccio presents

³¹ Alessandro Cortesi, "Una Lettura Teologica" in Masaccio and Cristina Danti, *La Trinità di Masaccio: il Restauro dell'Anno Duemila* (Firenze: Edifir., 2002), 49.

Christ in his human side, in his bodily essence in the moment of his death.³² Another aspect of this fresco that has been an object of study is the presence of the donors in the immediate foreground. Scholarship has focused on understanding who the donors were and whom they represented in the Florentine society of the beginning of the fifteenth century. The last studies about this subject identify two local families, either the Lenzi or the Berti. It seems that the Berti family owned a tomb at the bottom of the fresco and had a special devotion of the Trinity.³³

However, the significant thing about the donor's representation, for the sake of this study, is that they are portrayed life-size. The issue, then, becomes that we have in a major painting inside one of the most important churches in Florence, exhibiting a life-size representation of the donors. Obviously, there was a social and devotional (as well as political) significance in being portrayed in, and simply being incorporated into, this fresco, which was indicative of the intentions of this new mercantile elite of the Florentine society: "Florence's civic monuments, her churches and monasteries, her private places were all planned and subsidized by this elite."³⁴ At the same time I would like to underline that the presence of the donors in a devotional painting derives, both iconographically and conceptually, from the process of appropriation of the sacred space by the laity which had been initiated

³² Ibidem., 49.

³³ Rita Maria Comanducci, "L'Altare Nostro de la Trinita': Masaccio's Trinity and the Berti family". *The Burlington Magazine*. vol 145, n. 1198, (2003): 14-21.

³⁴ Gene Brucker "The Florentine Elite in the Early Fifteenth Century," in *Masaccio's Trinity*. Cambridge, ed Rona Goffen, (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 35.

during the thirteenth century. Renaissance studies tend to emphasize the idea that merchants, because of their *reason*-based frame of mind, were aware of “how unproductive formal religious behavior was or see the ‘unreasonableness’ of excessive cult.”³⁵ To the contrary, it has been proved not only that merchants went to church regularly,³⁶ but also that they were involved in image worship and in practices that were considered to be strictly confined to the rural world, which was framed as far away and completely distinct from the urban society of the day.³⁷ This aspect of devotion is distinct from the building of spacious burial chapels or private ownership of sacred spaces which were in some sense independent from the communal space inside the church.³⁸ This was a phenomenon that started at the beginning of the fourteenth century in Santa Croce in Florence. This suggests that we need to be aware that we cannot exclude and simply disregard certain behaviors on the grounds that they belong to a period which does not appear to have anything to share with the following one.

What we see developing in the late Medieval period, especially regarding the devotional relationship with the images, is the same. When I state it is the “same,” I do not mean to posit the existence of an unchangeable and incorruptible attitude

³⁵ Richard C. Trexler, "Florentine Religious Experience: The Sacred Image" in *Studies in the Renaissance*. 19 (1972): 33.

³⁶ Silvano Burgalassi, *Italiani in Chiesa. Analisi Sociologica del Comportamento Religioso* (Brescia: Mozelliana, 1967), 91-95.

³⁷ Richard C. Trexler, "Florentine Religious Experience, 34.

³⁸ Robert W. Gaston, "Sacred Place and Liturgical Space: Florence's Renaissance Churches" in *Renaissance Florence: a Social History*, ed. Crum, Roger J., and John T. Paoletti (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 331.

toward the images, but rather that there is a continuation that adapts itself to the time and its changes. When we see the donors represented in a devotional painting, among other things, we need to acknowledge that their presence was also the result of their real devotional attitude toward images. As in the *Trinity* by Masaccio, we do not only see the isolated image of the donors in the painting, but we see the donors in the same way that the Florentine people of the period must have seen them: praying in front of a real sculpture of Christ inside the church. A simple examination of the chronology reveals that the Brunelleschi wooden crucifix, probably made between 1410-1415, was already in Santa Maria Novella. We should consider the fact that believers, and in this case also the patrons of the Trinity, could have prayed in front of it, and that Masaccio himself could have looked at it in order to present his “pictorial” version of Christ. Brunelleschi’s crucifix and Masaccio’s Christ exhibit the same structure and bodily quality. While in Brunelleschi there is a body, in Masaccio there is the attempt (achieved) of presenting a tridimensional presence of Christ, along with the other characters and the space, in a two-dimensional surface. The point is that Christ, despite in the metaphysical presentation of the Trinity, could have readily been identified with both a real presence, a real body, and, as a consequence of the presence of the Brunelleschi crucifix, a wooden sculpture.

In order to understand with greater depth the connection between the two periods in question and, specifically for this case, the use of these wooden sculptures and their role in affecting devotion and society between the late Medieval

period and early Renaissance, it is critical to dispense with any strict and defined dichotomy such as religious vs secular or elite vs popular devotion. For example, if we compare Masaccio's *Trinity* with the *Crucifixion with Donor Jacopo di Bartolomeo* (1455) by Giovanni di Paolo (**Fig 21**), we can see at first several differences. Beyond the subject matter (one is the Trinity, the other the Crucifixion) a major striking difference is the background. The first features an illusion of a tridimensional space with life-size representations of the characters in it, whereas the second features a golden timeless background, more typical of the medieval tradition, despite the fact that it was made about thirty years after the Masaccio's *Trinity*. The function of Giovanni di Paolo's painting is given by the Latin inscription at the bottom of the panel: "*hic iacobvs pictor bartolomei iacet,*" meaning, "here lies the painter Jacopo di Bartolomeo." Most likely the presence of Jacopo di Bartolomeo in this painting was commemorative, and the work could have been used above a sepulcher.³⁹ The commemorative role can be applied for Masaccio's fresco as well.

In both cases the donors are present, taking part in the first person and bowing to an event of miraculous nature. In Masaccio's piece, the donors attend to the revelation of the Trinity, directly assisted by the Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist. Alternately, in Giovanni di Paolo's work, Jacopo di Bartolomeo has individualized features and looks up at the scene, even though his presence does not

³⁹ J. Pope-Hennessy, 'Giovanni di Paolo' in *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, vol. XLVI #2, Fall 1988, pp.5-48, illus. fig.59, p. 42.

directly participate in the desperate mourning of the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, and John the Evangelist. Rather, in this case we can interpret the presence of the donor in Giovanni di Paolo's panel as a sort of projection of what Jacopo di Bartolomeo sees. He is experiencing the moment of the death of Christ as a vision. The golden background enhances the idea of this as a supernatural moment. It would be reductive to consider the painting solely in terms of this interpretation, though.

This can be accomplished by combining the painting with the context and carefully considering the aspects in a more dynamic way. For example, even if we state that the Giovanni di Paolo's crucifixion represents, despite its commemorative function, the vision of Jacopo di Bartolomeo, we need to go beyond that. We need to look at the context in which this donor portrait was generated and insert it in a more general setting. Though public and private devotion have generally been considered as two separate discourses, it is only by interrelating these two aspects that we can provide a different perspective, a perspective which affords a more stable sense of continuity and dialogue between the late Medieval period and early Renaissance art. Another way to interpret the "vision" of Jacopo di Bartolomeo, which more adequately considers context, is through examination of the public rituals during the Holy Week.

Officially, there was a distinction between the liturgical rites linked to the Passion of Christ and the extraliturgical passion play. It should be noted, though,

that both cases featured a re-enactment of the last moments of the life of Christ, and that emotional participation was strong both inside and outside the church. Both situations would have provided a moment of direct correspondence, oscillating between the realms of witnessing the Passion and of being part of it. The faithful would have been able to alternate participating actively or meditating over it. They would have a physical role in it while in public or an introspective contemplation in private, or vice versa. The first condition would have been the continuation or completion of the other. So, in these terms, the vision of Jacopo di Bartolomeo could also be interpreted as the personal moment of meditation, while in public the reenactment of the Passion of Christ was occurring. The representation of Jacopo di Bartolomeo reveals as a consequence, despite its supposedly primary official role of commemorating the donor, the dual essence of embodying both a public and private dimension.

The same can be applied to the Masaccio fresco, in which the presence in front of the Trinity of the donors include both a private and public dimension, both connected to the practice of private and public devotion that the viewer would have been aware of. The donors would have been recognizable, not only because of their likenesses, which obviously was more accurate and developed during the fourteenth century, but also because of their presence in a devotional setting that belonged to the everyday world and the public context.

Often, the devotional dimension of some practices, and the production and use of art surrounding them, has been obscured by the connotation of popular practices and art, resulting in understandings which completely overlook their active role in shaping the mindset and the society of the period. The social importance of these practices, as well as the fact that people would read through the action in the devotional context both the dynamic and symbolic role of the artworks related to it, can be seen through another related example.⁴⁰

As occurred with paintings, the understanding of the presence and the representation of the donors was enabled by the “devotional grammar” that society developed during the liturgical and extraliturgical use of wooden sculptures. I argue that the wooden sculptures are the catalyst, both devotionally and conceptually, of

⁴⁰ One such example is the life-size wax effigies that Lorenzo de’ Medici ordered and had placed in two Florentine churches, along with a third in Santa Maria degli Angeli in Assisi. This occurred after his brother Giuliano de’ Medici was assassinated and Lorenzo was wounded on April 26, 1478 by political conspirators. Despite the wound, he was able to speak to the crowd after what happened, even with his clothes full of blood. These wax effigies were ex votos that had the role of giving thanks to God and spreading a political message. This gesture has been seen as the keen political intelligence of Lorenzo; accordingly, scholarship has focused on the material quality of the wax along with the political message.⁴⁰ These wax images “in the form of votive offering, appear in this context as extensions of the concept of public presence in communal spaces.”⁴⁰ Focusing only on wax images and their votive role, while excluding all connections with the more general devotional context, reduces the understanding of this phenomenon. If Lorenzo chose this “popular medium,” I would argue that it was not only the result of his political intelligence in general, but also that Lorenzo was drawing upon the known role of physicality, presence, and likeness of these statues. This was enabled by the concept of physicality, presence, and likeness elaborated throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries by the construction and use of the sculptures of the Crucified Christ. The power and authority accessed by the life-size wax statue of Lorenzo de Medici was the result of the power and authority assigned to the life-size wooden sculptures of Christ and the way they had been utilized. The impact of the work was not merely based on the strength of the wax sculpture’s resemblance to Lorenzo, but also in the object itself and its presence inside the sacred space of the Church to provide political ruling power as well.

See: Roberta Panzanelli, “Compelling Presence. Wax Effigies in Renaissance Florence” in *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure*, ed. Panzanelli, Roberta, and Julius Schlosser (Los Angeles, Calif: Getty Research Institute, 2008), 13.

the major form of piety in Italy. Even as regards the *space* in which devotion is performed, it is interesting to note that private devotion, also linked to the production and use of book of hours used less by the clergy than by the laity, comes after the laity itself finalized its “conquest” of the sacred space once destined only for the clergy. We observe from the first production of the wooden Descent from the Cross a slow process of utilization, substitution, increasing access to the space inside the church, the utilization of the space outside of the church, the contemporaneous building of the oratories, and the performance of passion play up through the building of private chapels and funerary monuments inside churches.

The point here is not to advance the idea that wooden sculptures were solely responsible for all of these different elements occurring in Italy during the late Medieval and early Renaissance period, of course. Rather, what I argue is that their role has been incredibly underestimated, and we are responsible for revising the period, adding all the different characteristics that are embodied and the consequences that elicited. Once the laity felt comfortable in being and acting in the sacred space activated by the presence of and the interaction with these sculptures, they were able, in terms of active participation, to bring the imagination, the scenes of the Passion, and the physical relationship with Christ at home with them, through the book of hours.

The most influential devotional books, such as the *Meditationes Vitae Christi* or the *Vita Christi* of Ludolph of Saxony, express the importance of physically living

the moment of the Passion of Christ, as if the devotee were there and physically felt the suffering of Christ. It would be wrong to think that this could only be, or was the sole consequence of, a strictly intellectual operation or an abstract process of meditation which had no connection with the real world. I stress the fact that this was, instead, the result of personally living the drama of the Passion, reenacted by the believers and made possible and real by the physicality, likeness, and ductility of the animated sculptures of the dead Christ. These celebrations were widespread, and popular religion became so intertwined with the whole aspect of "human life, outward and inward, with all its powers, mental and spiritual, instead of proclaiming its hostility to them," that "...it entered into the closest association with popular culture that it is impossible to say which dominated which".⁴¹

Scholarship and studies on the Renaissance have most frequently focused on the period by considering what happened in the fifteenth and sixteenth century to be a sort of a significant fracture with the past, underestimating the elements of continuity and influence. If we consider that the most numerous extant examples of animated sculptures of the crucified Christ in Italy are from the fifteenth and sixteenth century, to say nothing of the fact that the the majority of them come from Florence and the Tuscan area, it becomes clear that the use of these sculptures was very common and widespread right in the center of the development of the so-called

⁴¹ Jacob Burckhardt and James Hastings Nichols, *Force and Freedom: Reflections on History*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 247.

“Renaissance”. Another aspect of this issue that we need to consider, which has been a dramatic factor that condemned the wooden sculptures, is their capability to be adapted and altered so that they could not only satisfy the different liturgical needs, but also the aesthetic taste of the period. The fact that these objects were altered, even to the extent of being dressed or having devotional pins attached to them, has been considered to be simply an expression of the devotion of the mass and lower classes, a phenomenon completely divorced from the “learned culture” and its way of living the devotion. This prejudice condemned these sculptures, and scholarship has also condemned the whole world that was attached to them, overlooking its presence and its influence, along with their role in the devotional and lay society of the fifteenth and sixteenth century. The devotional use of and relationship towards these objects does not simply end; it changes. We need to find the threads and connections with the previous period, and eventually the following one, until today. This need is demonstrated by the fact that some of these animated sculptures of the crucified Christ are in use today by confraternities in the celebrations of the Passion during the Holy Week. While the ritual changed over time, we do still have the same sculptures that were made during the fifteenth or sixteenth century, if not earlier. The procession of the dead Christ in the city of Leonessa is an example of such usage. They still today use the animated wooden sculpture of Christ that was made in the sixteenth century (**Fig 22**). While this occurs in a rural town in Italy, as

opposed to in the urban centers, I would not underestimate the authenticity and importance of these rituals.

An example I would like to consider from this perspective is the *Lamentation* (**Fig 23**) by Fra Angelico, which was part of the San Marco Altarpiece (**Fig 24**) and features the Virgin enthroned with child surrounded by Saints. The iconographic choice of the main part of the altarpiece reflects both the traditions of the Dominicans as well as the presence of Cosimo de Medici and the way that he was exercising control over Florence and the Florentine.⁴² This altarpiece has been considered elsewhere as an example of perspectival metaphors that were mentioned by Leon Battista Alberti in his *Della Pittura*: "I inscribe a quadrangle of right angles as large as I wish, which is considered to be an open window through which I see what I want to paint."⁴³ In fact, Fra Angelico shows a perspectival view of a heavenly garden as well as drawing the curtains on the surface of the image in order to provide a signal of the otherness of scene.⁴⁴

Despite the large size of the area occupied by the Madonna and Child enthroned with saints, there is also strong reference to Christological themes and, especially, Passion imagery.⁴⁵ In fact, at the bottom of the Madonna enthroned there is a small panel showing the Crucifixion (**Fig 25**), and underneath it is the central

⁴² William Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 107.

⁴³ Alberti, Leon Battista, *On painting*, trans J.R. Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 56.

⁴⁴ Barnaby Nygren, "Fra Angelico's San Marco Altarpiece and the Metaphors of Perspective " in *Notes in the History of Art*. 22 (1): 26.

⁴⁵ Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*, 110.

panel of the predella that represents the *Lamentation*. It has been said, to justify the presence and correspondence of these three different scenes, that Fra Angelico could have referred to the Dominican community's ideas as found in the writing of Saint Catherine of Siena. According to Saint Catherine's *Dialogue*, because of Adam's sin there is now a vast distance between earth and heaven and the "bridge" to overcome this distance is the crucifixion of his Son.⁴⁶ So in order to reach the Heaven anyone need to "experience" the Crucifixion of Christ and the Eucharist provides the strength to get through this journey.

In relation to the altarpiece the Heaven was represented by the main part, and while the "bridge" to it is in the little panel of the *Crucifixion*, the place where the soul can find peace in this spiritual journey is in the *Eucharist*, represented in this case by the *Lamentation*, in which the soul would strengthen itself through this journey to heaven, and this would have referred specifically to the Dominican friars who were the users of this altarpiece.⁴⁷

The pax with its *Crucifixion* has a clear medieval sensibility, especially manifest in its golden background. According to Barnaby Nygren, in his study on Fra Angelico's San Marco Altarpiece, "By placing the fictive panel between the real and painted realms, Angelico emphasizes the remoteness of the latter, but also suggests the possibility of transcendence through Christ and his sacrifice".⁴⁸ While I agree

⁴⁶ Ibidem., 110.

⁴⁷ Ibidem., 110.

⁴⁸ Barnaby Nygren, Fra Angelico's San Marco, 29.

that Fra Angelico could have played with the perspective and the presence of the curtains as long as the position of the pax in order to provide a sense of remoteness, I argue that both the pax and the central panel of the *Lamentation* need to be analyzed in greater depth. In the case of the golden background in the pax with the *Crucifixion*, having a golden background suggests a sense of remoteness as well, in which the figures are accessible but not physically present. So it is not just the perspective, as suggested, that functions to create this liminal sense of heavenly distance though the pax is closer and could potentially be touched and kissed by the viewer, but also because of the remoteness suggested by the golden background that the work stages the crucifixion in a timeless space. Thus, in this altarpiece there are multiple levels that define the distance between the real world and the heavenly. Angelico creates a dialogue between the images represented in the paintings and the real world, and in order to do that he uses different elements. Regarding the small pax with the *Crucifixion*, Beato Angelico refers to the Medieval world, considering along with the iconography also the devotional dimension of the period. Through use of a golden background, he puts the scene in an otherworldly dimension. At the same time, he puts the pax in front of the panel with the Virgin and Child, accessible to the kiss of the friars and the believers, thus providing an access, a physical access, to this scene of the Passion of Christ. The relationship with this image follows the rituality of the celebrations around the wooden sculptures during the Holy Week, which provide the physical presence of Christ and his body as

well as the metaphysical reenactment of the moment of the Passion that occurred in another time and another place. The panel in the predella with the *Lamentation* right underneath the *Crucifixion* supports this interpretation.

Furthermore, if we look at the organization of the *Lamentation* (**Fig 26**), we can find some connections with both the devotional aspects of the late Medieval period and the awareness of the devotional context of Fra Angelico and the Dominicans. This *Lamentation* has been linked to the Eucharist, and the subject itself was connected to the iconography of the *Man of Sorrow* (**Fig 27**).⁴⁹ The figure of Christ shows several similarities with the iconography of the Christ as the *Man of Sorrow*: the legs are covered by the sheet and the upper part of the body somehow is delimited by the window of the sepulcher.⁵⁰

Beyond this, I would consider the central panel of the predella not only as a re-elaborated version of the iconography of Christ as the *Man of Sorrow*, but also as a conscious reference to the devotional context of the current period that has the origins in the Middle Ages. If we look at the organization of the Fra Angelico's panel

⁴⁹ Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*, 110. "Moreover, just as his human nature as a baby was at the same time fully divine, so his corruptible body as a man became incorruptible through the Resurrection. The body that died and was buried was also the body that rose again on the third day. These are old truths, even commonplaces in Christian lore. Their significance for Fra Angelico is that on Dominican altarpieces the Man of Sorrow specifically symbolized the Eucharistic body of Christ, the 'Corpus Domini' in whose presence Dominican friars sang the liturgy of the hours and celebrated the liturgy of the Mass. It seems certain that the lower part of the San Marco altarpiece concerned the Eucharist. For in addition to the Man of Sorrow on the predella, Fra Angelico included a two-dimensional Crucifix rising in the front plane of the altarpiece and overlapping the scene in the main panel."

⁵⁰ Alexander Nagel, *Michelangelo and the Reform of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 57.

painting, we see a symmetrical organization of the space and disposition of the characters therein. It has been pointed out that this reflects the typical artistic innovation of the beginning of the fourteenth century, and the predella followed the organization of the central panel.⁵¹ Also, the gestures of the Virgin and Saint John have been considered primarily as an adaptation to the iconography of the *Man of Sorrow*.

I would suggest, instead, that the iconographical organization of the *Lamentation* follows the real ritual of the Descent from the Cross, which has its origin in the Middle Ages, and that this still had an important impact upon the Florentine devotional context during the fifteenth century. The symmetrical organization of the scene was already a prerogative of the medieval wooden Descent from the Cross (**Fig 28**), and the position of Christ within this work, more than the *Man of Sorrow*, traces the wooden Christ figures which were part of the Descent. The symmetrical organization and the presence of the Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist holding the hands of Christ with his arms hanging open clearly reflect the organization of the Descent from the Cross.⁵²

However, I asserts that Fra Angelico must have looked as a source of his inspiration, more than the wooden groups of Descent from the Cross, that somehow were dismissed at the end of the thirteenth century, at the animated sculptures of

⁵¹ Magnolia Scudieri, "La Pala di San Marco: Apogee della Committenza Medicea e Manifesto della Tradizione Dominicana" in *L'Angelico Ritrovato: Studi e Ricerche per la Pala di San Marco* ed. Acidini Luchinat, Cristina, and Magnolia Scudieri (Livorno: Sillabe, 2008), 54.

⁵² Nagel, *Michelangelo and the Reform of Art*, 57.

the Crucified Christ, utilized for the ritual of the Descent from the cross, during the Holy Week or even during the Passion Play. Given that the utilization of these kinds of sculptures was a combination of the creation of the previous Descent from the Cross and the adapted rituals, in which the believers were more involved, Fra Angelico's painting seems to reflect this ritual combination.

The scene also features Nicodemus; and the way that he is holding the body of Christ suggests that he is taking time and somehow stopping himself mid-action to show the body of Christ to the believers.⁵³ However, Nicodemus' posture indicates that it would not have been possible for him to hold a real human body; instead, he is certainly holding a sculpture, a simulacrum of the real body of Christ. I assert that Fra Angelico could have observed the rituals of the Holy Week in order to visualize the scene, rather than simply drawing upon the iconography of the *Man of Sorrow*. This assertion is further supported by the fact that while one person would not have been able to hold a human body in the way seen in the *Lamentation*, it would have been possible for one person to hold a sculpture by himself, and that position would look very much like the way that Nicodemus is holding the body of Christ. Thus, more than the Eucharist, I would argue that this *Lamentation* reflects the devotional context of Florence at the beginning of the fifteenth century and that

⁵³ Ibidem., 57.

Fra Angelico could have relied on it in order to match the representation of a historical setting with the sacred events.⁵⁴

We might discuss the fact that Dominicans were not officially very sculpture-oriented in their devotional and theological mission. Nevertheless, it has been argued that Giovanni Pisano, in his creation of his influential *crucifixi dolorosi* (**Fig 29**) was drawing upon a social costume promoted by the Dominican order.⁵⁵ If we look at the *De modo orandi*, the book that novices of the Dominican order used to follow the example of Saint Dominic and they were attentive to the illustrations in the book, we see that the representation of Christ resembles that of a sculpted version, especially one in front of the painted triptych behind it (**Fig 30**).

We have examples of wooden sculptures inside Dominican Churches or related to the Dominican order. One of the earliest is the crucifixion by Lando di Pietro, a life-size wooden image of Christ made in 1338 that belonged to the Compagnia di San Domenico (**Fig 31**), and another example is the famous Brunelleschi's crucifix. A more interesting example, however, is the cross from the circle of Baccio da Montelupo (**Fig 32**). Even if the sculpture has not been recognized as one of the best expressions of Baccio da Montelupo⁵⁶, the work is relevant to my argument in that there is an animated sculpture of the crucified

⁵⁴ Ibidem., 59.

⁵⁵ About this specific topic see next chapter. See also Pavel Kalina, "Giovanni Pisano, the Dominicans, and the Origin of the Crucifixi Dolorosi". *Artibus Et Historiae*. (47), 2003: 81-100.

⁵⁶ Margrit Lisner, *Holzkrucifixe in Florenz und in der Toskana von der Zeit um 1300 bis zum frühen Cinquecento* (München: Bruckmann, 1970), 82-85.

Christ in the principal church of the Dominicans in Florence. While it is true that the date of completion of the sculpture was ca. 1502, coming about sixty years apart from the Fra Angelico's San Marco altarpiece, I believe that in this case we do not need to think strictly about chronological proximity. It is more useful to consider the sensibility of the Dominicans toward a medium and its presence and the use of it that was not part of the devotional mindset of the Dominican mendicant order at first, but become part of it as the use and the symbolic role of these sculptures became more pronounced with the development of the devotion toward them. The same occurred amongst the Franciscans. At first they had not relied on the sculptural medium to spread their evangelical message, counting instead upon painted images of Christ, but we found several later examples, even of animated sculptures of the crucified Christ, in churches of the Franciscan order. Obviously the most famous example is the Donatello's animated sculpture in Santa Croce in Florence **(Fig 33)**, but we have further examples at our disposal. A significant example is in the mother church of Franciscans in Assisi. In fact, in the chapel of Saint Catherine of Alexandria in the lower Church in the Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi there is a wooden crucifix sculpted by a German artist identified as "Giovanni Tedesco" at the beginning of the sixteenth century which has movable arms and it is used still today for the celebrations of Holy Friday⁵⁷ **(Fig 34)**.

⁵⁷ Giovan Battista Fidanza, "Transetto d'Ingresso, Cappella di Santa Caterina d'Alessandria" in *La Basilica di San Francesco ad Assisi*, ed Gianfranco Malafrina, trans. Heather Mackay (Modena, Italy: F.C. Panini, 2005), 321.

What we need to realize about the existence of these wooden sculptures is that they were not just a presence or an object utilized for processions or within the liturgies. They had the capability since the Medieval period to become the simulacrum of the real body of Christ and, as a consequence, they had the power to affect the devotion and the behavior around it. This implies also a visual translation of this comportment around the sculptures; an example, as I mention above, is the *Lamentation* by Fra Angelico.

A visual response to Fra Angelico's *Lamentation* is the Rogier van der Weyden *Christ at the Tomb* (1450) (**Fig 35**). Van der Weyden's *Christ at the Tomb* used Fra Angelico's *Lamentation* as a model, and this association corrected the previous assumption that van der Weyden reinterpreted the iconography of the *Man of Sorrow*.⁵⁸ This supposition came from the fact that the upper part of Christ's body is similar to the canonical representation of the Man of Sorrow and, though this iconography was not very widespread in the north of Europe, it has been considered the possibility that Rogier van der Weyden could have had a personal knowledge of this figurative tradition.⁵⁹ These considerations show, once more, the attention scholarship gives to painting and the potential correspondences in visualizing different religious subjects, excluding a priori other assumptions and failing to pay attention to the real context the artists were living in. Previously, I

⁵⁸ Nagel, *Michelangelo*, 61.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem.*, 61.

mentioned how Fra Angelico could have looked at and considered the rituals in which animated wooden sculptures of the crucified Christ were used, in order to have a visual example to elaborate his interpretation of the Entombment. In the altarpiece, the *Coronation of the Virgin* Fra Angelico does represent Christ in the central panel of the predella as the *Man of Sorrow* (**Fig 36**). I assume that if Fra Angelico wanted to represent the *Man of Sorrow*, he could have done so without difficulty and his “alteration” and interpretation of this subject comes, in some capacity, from an awareness of the Holy Week rituals in which sculptures were used. The fact that both the *Man of Sorrow* and the animated sculptures of Christ existed in a devotional context does not mean that one excluded the other, so they can provide a different visual context as well. While scholarship has considered the iconography of the *Man of Sorrow* for van der Weyden altarpiece, before finding a visual correspondence with Beato Angelico, it has totally overlooked that in Belgium, where van der Weyden lived, there were animated sculptures of the crucified Christ, as well as examples of the Descent from the Cross. Even if the only extant example is one animated sculpture of Christ at Huy, dated from the fourteenth century and located at the church of Saint-Étienne-au-Mont⁶⁰, and only one figure that belonged to the group of the Descent from the Cross (end of twelfth century) that comes from the city of Leuven. This shows that these sculptures were in use in Belgium as well, and Rogier van der Weyden was most likely aware of their

⁶⁰ Gesine and Johannes Taubert, “*Mittelalterliche Kruzifixe*, pag 43, cat. No 41.

devotional use and could have assisted in one of those liturgies in which they were used.⁶¹ The same Christ in his altarpiece shows more similarities with a sculpture than would a representation of the *Man of Sorrow*. Additionally, the way that the figures around Christ hold him shows very direct connection to the presentation of the figures of the Descent from the Cross and the way they sustain and carry the body of Christ, bearing much more resemblance to the display of a sculpture, or what it could have happened using a sculpture versus a real body. Despite the Italian connection and iconographic closeness to the Beato Angelico's *Lamentation*, I would not underestimate the power of these sculptures in Belgium and their potential in affecting the practical and visual devotion, as with those in Italy.

Overall, the problem is not just a potential visual correspondence, an attempt to find a direct parallel between the medieval wooden sculpted version and the later painted version of the Descent. Rather, the idea is to understand how the believers related to the sculpted form and how this affected the perception of the space and the sacred scene in its visual painted rendering. This can be said about their presence in the space as well as the visual tool to understand the painted version.

⁶¹ Rogier van der Weyden most famous altarpiece, of the Deposition, is clearly based on a sculpted altarpiece. See Hans Belting and Christiane Kruse, *Die Erfindung des Gemäldes: das erste Jahrhundert der niederländischen Malerei* (München: Hirmer, 1994), 83-84. Belting is mainly interested in using Rogier's *Deposition* as part of his thesis of an "invention of painting." He mentions how Rogier's painting was pushing the media-boundaries, and transforming the types of sculptural groups that were common at the time into "living sculptures" that are nearly life size: scenes come alive for the viewers—making the historical event part of the "here and now". For Belting, these paintings were directly tied to bringing a visual reality to Mass, with Christ's body "coming alive" behind the raising of the Host.

In both Fra Angelico and Rogier van der Weyden, attention is paid to the narrative and to the display of the body of Christ, and I would suggest that this new pictorial adaptation of this iconography to represent these sacred events comes from the direct observation of liturgical and extralitururgical ceremonies in which wooden sculptures were utilized. The presence of Nicodemus behind the body of Christ and the way that he is holding Christ shows an intention to present the body to the believers⁶² rather than to support a real body and carry it to the sepulcher. The same position of the Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist functions as it did in Beato Angelico's altarpiece. Even in the case of Rogier van der Weyden's panel, painting the scheme of the figures was associated with the iconography of the *Man of Sorrow* and, especially, Lorenzo Monaco's interpretation (**Fig 37**). The presentation of the body does resemble the dynamic of the iconography of the *Man of Sorrow*, but the consistency of the bodies within the scene suggests another interpretation. In fact, in both Fra Angelico and van der Weyden, it seems that it is only Christ, the person, that does not provide the sense of a real human weight, not really matching with the broader dynamic of the scene. In addition, the scene seems to be stopped mid-action in order to display the body of Christ to the viewer because of the "function and address" of the image.⁶³ The viewer's gaze is playing a role in the piece activating the contemplation of Christ in this moment of display of

⁶² Nagel, *Michelangelo*, 70.

⁶³Ibidem., 70.

his body. This role of the beholder seems more active in Beato Angelico's panel, while van der Weyden seems to reduce this distance between the scene represented and the viewer, adding the figure of Mary Magdalene in a position that resembles (and includes) that of the viewer, and, at the same time, it justifies the frontal presentation of the body of Christ.⁶⁴ This choice seems very similar to the dynamic, presented earlier in this study, in the *Lamentation* by Giotto in the Arena Chapel in Padova (**Fig 38**), in which the inclusion of the beholder to the pictorial space, by putting one of the mourners showing his back, was the result of the awareness and an eventual influence of the liturgies around the celebrations over the death of Christ and the way that they include the faithful in the space.

I argue, given the frontal display of Christ and the association of his representation to a sculpture, as opposed to a real human body, and the fact that in both panels the narrative aspect is combined with the attempt to present Christ for adoration trying to actively include the beholder as well, that the key to understanding the iconographical innovation of the panels of Beato Angelico and Rogier van der Weyden comes from the devotional context of the period in which the sculptural medium was utilized. This is why we have the representation of the body of Christ as life-size and weightless, combining both the narrative and the sacramental significance of the display of the body of Christ.

⁶⁴ Ibidem., 70.

The point I am trying to make is not that interpretation should totally exclude the iconography of Christ as the *Man of Sorrow*, but that it is worthwhile to associate some artworks that have been linked to the representation and veneration of the Man of Sorrow to the wooden sculptures and the rituals around it. Doing so will change our perspective and understanding of Christian iconography during the fifteenth century. For example, Angelo Poliziano, a scholar and poet during the Renaissance period, mentioned the frontal presentation of Christ in his writing and used it as a part of a Holy Friday Sermon. Even in this case, this presentation has been associated with the iconography of the *Man of Sorrow*⁶⁵: “He who has been taken down from the Cross, with his arms spread, with his head bowed, with his heart open, calls you, my fathers, invites you to lament with him his most bitter pain. Accompany his holy wife, disconsolate widow in kneeling and bowing and prostrating yourself before his holy feet”.⁶⁶

Poliziano’s sermon has been considered as a way to stimulate contemplation to the figure of Christ⁶⁷ but it also suggests taking action in front of the image of Christ along with the meditation. In fact, he incites the believers to “kneel and bow and prostrate before the holy feet of Christ.” This is an action that can be easily

⁶⁵ Ibidem., 75.

⁶⁶ Poliziano, Angelo, and Isidoro Del Lungo, *Prose Volgari Inedite e Poesie Latine e Greche Edite e Inedite* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1976), 7. “Lui disposto giù di croce, colle braccia distese, col capo chino, col cuore aperto, vi chiama, Padri miei, v’invita a pianger seco il suo acerbissimo dolore; far compagnia alla sua santa sposa, vedova sconsolata...; a inginocchiarvi a inchinarvi e prosternervi dinanzi a’ suoi santissimi piedi.” As quoted in Nagel, Michelangelo, 75, see also pag 234 note 71 of the same book.

⁶⁷ Nagel, *Michelangelo*, 75.

taken; it would be possible, and it would certainly make sense if they considered the possibility of finding themselves in front of a sculpture. While it is not possible to know the dynamic of the rituals around the sculptures with certainty, we take as a starting point today's rituals during Holy Week or the utilization of sculpture, more generally.

For example, if we consider the ritual of the *Scavigliazione* in Assisi that occurs every year at sunset on Maundy Thursday, we can begin to generate a more nuanced conceptualization of these rituals and make some considerations. In the Cathedral of San Rufino in Assisi, two priests are charged with detaching Christ from the cross and laying the sculpture of the dead Christ down in a coffin (**Fig 39**). After Christ is in the coffin, believers are able to get close to his body and touch and kiss him (**Fig 40**). If we look at some pictures of today's celebrations, even from other part of the world, we see a visual dynamic that can be associated with what Poliziano says in his sermon (**Fig 41**). Considering in the way that Christ is held and displayed during these celebrations (**Fig 42**), it is possible to find some parallel with the way Christ is displayed in Fra Angelico and van der Weyden's panel. The paintings seem to assume the function of an altarpiece in trying to control and stop the movement of an action in order to display the body of Christ for adoration. This action, I would suggest, does not come from other paintings or from the narration of the Gospels related to the Passion of Christ, but from the real actions for the celebrations over the dead body of Christ, in which the representation of the event

has the power to make the events authentic, alive, and, above all, present in a dynamic in which the devotion becomes representation and the representation shows the devotion. Even the traditional representation of the man of sorrow was influenced by the production and use of these kinds of sculptures. This is particularly true in the example with the widespread arms stretched straight out derive from the wooden sculptures groups, and a direct reference could be the group of Sant Antonio in Pescia (**fig 43**)

Extant scholarship has underestimated the presence of wooden sculptures and their capability to carry an independent and powerful meaning in relation to the representation of Christ and, as a consequence, the way that they affected the understanding of sacred scenes and the visualization of them.

A further example I want to bring to attention is *The Dead Christ* (1480) by Andrea Mantegna (**Fig 44**). Scholarship praised the painting as one of the most “memorable, singular and vivid images of the Quattrocento”⁶⁸ and the interpretations vary from considering the title assigned to the painting, *The Foreshortened Christ* or the most common *The Dead Christ*, to the scientific accuracy of the rendition of the dead Christ⁶⁹. Other interpretations approach the piece “not so much as a technical device but rather an expressive one, contributing to the Savior’s secularization through the almost Expressionistic shock tactic achieved by

⁶⁸ Colin Eisler, "Mantegna's Meditation on the Sacrifice of Christ: His Synoptic Savior". *Artibus Et Historiae*. (53), 2006: 9.

⁶⁹ Roberto Smith, "Natural Versus Scientific Vision: the Foreshortened Figure in the Renaissance," *Gazette des Beux-Arts*, 84 (July-Dec. 1974), pp 239-248.

such an indiscreet vantage point”⁷⁰ Beyond the different analyses, several considerations about the Mantegna’s interpretations raise important questions. First of all, the presentation of Christ in this way provided a direct “sense of proximity,” and the beholder is able to access the body of Christ in preparation for burial.⁷¹

Further, this painting has been considered and evaluated according to the theories or aesthetic sensibilities of the period, sometimes adducing perspectival theories or positing “a mathematical device deliberately distorted toward a theological mission”.⁷² It seems that what is missing is the most important consideration concerning this painting, which is, I believe, its connection with the devotional reality of the period⁷³. Considering the groundbreaking interpretation of Mantegna and the fact it was “unprecedented,” discovering the potential visual source would help to understand the meaning and hone analysis. While in painting this representation of Christ was unprecedented, believers, and most likely Mantegna as well, had had opportunity to see and experience visually and physically the body of Christ in the above-described position (**Fig 45**). The use of the wooden

⁷⁰ H. Jantzen, “Mantegnas Cristo in Scurto”, in *Stephaniskop, Ernst Fabricius zum 6.9.1927*, Freiburg, 1927, pp 11. As quoted in Eisler, *Mantegna's Meditation*.

⁷¹ Eisler, *Mantegna's Meditation*, 12.

⁷² Colin Eisler, *Mantegna's Meditation*, 14.

⁷³ Especially in relation to this painting, we need to acknowledge also the connection of the Gonzaga family with the cult of relics from Jerusalem and how this devotional aspect affected the art production of the period. In *Mantegna's Lamentation on the Dead Christ*, the stone of unction has a major role and might be the result of a possible possession of this precious relic in Gonzaga’s court, even if it is not possible to trace what happened to it. See for further information: Stefano L’Occaso, “Mantova, I Gonzaga, le reliquie di Gerusalemme” in *Rendiconti*, Ser. 9, Vol 19 (2008), 695-726.

sculptures could certainly have been the visual prompt that Mantegna could have referred to in his painting, and the relationship that devotees had with it could have been the reason behind Mantegna's creating this sense of proximity and access to the body represented on canvas.

I would additionally argue that the proportional alterations that we find in his painting, which have been objects of great interest among scholars (the feet too small, while the head larger than it supposed to be), are the visual adaptation on canvas of a reality that was not static, but dynamic, like the liturgy and devotion around this sculpture. Believers in front of a sculpture, lying down over a deathbed or, as in this case, the stone of the sepulcher, would have experienced the body of Christ in an active way, moving around, touching him, kissing him without the problem that one perspective would have altered the perception of the body of Christ or created issues that would have offended the holiness of him **(Fig 46)**. Thus, the canvas by Mantegna can be considered the result of a potential visual dialogue that the artist had with the devotional activities of the period, and these devotional activities with the particular use and display of a wooden sculpture of the dead Christ could have been the stimuli that affected the creation of such artwork. Obviously, there are not documents that can confirm this, but the new foreshortened position, the fact that the feet seem to come out to the space of the viewer as if they were touchable, and the closeness of the Virgin Mary as an example of how to approach and be close the body of Christ, all serve to create an "intimate

view in which the viewer by implication is placed inside the scene"⁷⁴ and these are definitely elements that we do find in the realm of sculpture and the devotion during the Medieval period and early Renaissance. The painting wants to include the viewer and it is working in a similar way to the devotion around the sculptures in which the believers are a component, included in the sacred space and close to the body of Christ. The painting requires a "devotion to around the sculpture" approach and mindset to be understood and lived.

The study of this canvas also included the sexuality of Christ, and considering also that the genitalia of Christ correspond to the intersection of the diagonals of any perspective construction it drew the attention to the fact that Circumcision was the first location where Christ lost blood.⁷⁵ I do not challenge this approach or possible interpretations of the meanings of the canvas; rather, I argue that the different speculations do not consider the object within a context of reality. What I mean is that when scholars tried to understand and analyze this innovative vantage point, the starting points of the interpretations come from the realm of theories or from considering the pictorial situation. What it is totally omitted is the context, whether social or devotional, and how these realities could have affected or helped the understanding of these pictorial creations. The real innovation of Mantegna's *Dead Christ* is in his realization and application of the idea on canvas, but the background

⁷⁴ Nagel, *Michelangelo*, 81.

⁷⁵ Eisler, *Mantegna's Meditation*, 14.

needed in order to understand and experience visually the painting was in the reality, that is the devotional dynamic between sculpture and beholder.

Another painting that I want to consider to support this argument is the *Entombment* by Michelangelo (**Fig 47**). This famous artwork has been inserted in the lifelong interest of Michelangelo with the “theme of the *Pietà* and, more generally, with his effort in inserting a humanist conception of art in the service of the traditional functions of religious images”.⁷⁶ Michelangelo’s desire to reinterpret Christian mysteries relying on figural movement and expression taken from the antique and adapted to the current Renaissance art.⁷⁷ This intention was first applied and was clear with the creation of his *Pietà*, which represented a fracture from its medieval predecessors, and especially those produced in the late medieval north of Europe.⁷⁸ (**Fig 48**) This process of restoration became evident also with the *Entombment*, in which there is the attempt to combine “the relation between viewer and cult object as one between present and past thus making the problem of distance central to the picture’s subject”.⁷⁹ The painting itself proposes not only the representation of sacred figure, but also a story, an action in which the viewer is

⁷⁶ Nagel, *Michelangelo*, 214.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem.*, 214.

⁷⁸ Joanna E Ziegler, "Michelangelo and the Medieval Pietà: The Sculpture of Devotion or the Art of Sculpture?" *Gesta*. 34 (1), 1995: 28-36. In this article Joanna Ziegler highlighted how Michelangelo aimed to the inviolability of the object and its resistance to the changes typical of the popular devotion and rituality.

⁷⁹ Nagel, *Michelangelo*, 16.

placed in front of the full length Christ figure at the bottom of the steps, becoming an active part for the fruition of the painting.⁸⁰

If we consider what is happening in the painting itself, we can start to make some considerations. The figures represented by Michelangelo are shown in an action that indicates that they are moving backward and, as a consequence, far away from the viewer. They seem to be climbing up toward the tomb that it is being prepared by another figure, even though that part is unfinished. The way Christ is carried away raises some doubts about the dynamic of his support. Another issue is that the combination of the frontal orientation combined with the movement backwards into the distance from the presence and sight of the viewer is something that has been considered rare in the paintings during the Renaissance period.⁸¹ Interpretations about these aspects of the work lead to the consideration that it would have been quite a challenge for many contemporaries to understand or identify the painting's subject.⁸²

Without a doubt, Michelangelo chose to represent the scene in this way and I argue that it could have relied on different elements outside of the paintings in order to account for a full understanding this painting. In fact, scholars have pointed out the fact that Christ is carried in a way that looks somehow awkward, or at least not completely natural. While the other characters around him seem to struggle

⁸⁰ Ibidem., 25.

⁸¹ Ibidem., 28.

⁸² Ibidem., 28.

with the weight of the body, the same cannot be said about the figure of Christ. Christ seems weightless and very rigid in his frontal presentation. The only way that Christ could be represented in this way is if we consider the possibility that Michelangelo might have looked at one of the animated sculpture of Christ used during the liturgy of the Holy Week. As I mentioned regarding the Fra Angelicos and Rogier van der Weyden's *Entombment of Christ*, one way to hold, present, and carry a body in this manner is if one uses a wooden sculpture and not a real body. If we put this possibility under consideration, we can infer that devotees could have been in the position to understand the painting because of its connection with the liturgy and the way Christ was displayed (**Fig 49**). In addition, believers would have participated actively in the celebrations around the death of Christ, and the painting itself requires a direct and active dialogue with the viewer. As a consequence, we can underline a similarity and connection in the dynamic extant between the real celebrations around the Passion of Christ and the scene represented in Michelangelo's work. Contemporary devotees, because of their active participation, would have been able to understand the unusual scene in Michelangelo's *Entombment* because they would have recognized the body of Christ, both as simulacrum and real body of Christ, due to the nature of these sculptures and their use. Michelangelo's effort was to turn into painting, into an altarpiece, an action that belonged to the liturgy and celebrations.

The unusual iconography of Michelangelo's *Entombment* has been considered as an attempt to "bring a new conception of history painting, derived from antique models and carefully articulated by Leon Battista Alberti in his book *On Painting*".⁸³ In his treatise, Leon Battista Alberti considers the *historia* the responsibility of the painter, that is to present material, proportion, gesture, and theme in a consistent way. Among his examples, he presents the carrying of the dead Meleager to discuss the problem of gesture and appropriateness to function because it shows the whole spectrum, "from the inertness of death to the activity of life"⁸⁴: "This is the most difficult thing of all to do, for to represent the limbs of a body entirely at rest is as much sign of an excellent artist as to render them all alive and in action".⁸⁵

According to Alexander Nagel, Michelangelo's historical interest in his *Entombment* comes from the attempt to adapt the Leon Battista Alberti's conception of *historia* to a Christian context and the difficulties this adaptation could imply.⁸⁶ Michelangelo had a strong interest in the past and looked at Giotto with admiration, but also with a formal estrangement because of the distance between him and the time Giotto created his art, as well as because the figural style was not something

⁸³ Ibidem., 33.

⁸⁴ Ibidem., 34.

⁸⁵ Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans Cecil Grayson (London: Penguin; New York California Press, 1991), paragraph 37. As quoted in Nagel, *Michelangelo*, 35.

⁸⁶ Nagel, *Michelangelo*, 35.

that his contemporaries aspired to.⁸⁷ At the same time, Michelangelo was interested by the remoteness of the art of Giotto's era, especially for their aura of authentic religiosity.⁸⁸ A further struggle during Michelangelo's period was that in the sixteenth century, the modern aesthetic ideals were often not well-matched with religious intentions and "a conception of reform as restoration leads to modes of archaism that go well beyond the simple quotation of old models. It makes experiments with the very structure of the work of art into a model of archeological investigations".⁸⁹ As a consequence, the *Entombment* became the means through which Michelangelo tried to combine the relationship between the viewer and the cult object as though it were a relationship between the present and the past.

I argue that Michelangelo's intention, in his endeavor to combine the religious aura of the past with the aesthetic of the period, did not confine himself to looking at painting. As I mentioned before, considering the body posture and the way that Christ is held, it seems plausible that he might have looked at these animated sculptures in order to organize his painting. First of all, Michelangelo wanted to bring new attention to the originary Christocentric emphasis in Christian art, and the use of these sculptures was since the beginning the result of gathering the attention to the body of Christ and his humanity and, above all, the possibility to access and live directly this side of the divinity of Christ. One aspect that might be

⁸⁷ Ibidem., 9

⁸⁸ Ibidem., 10.

⁸⁹ Ibidem., 16.

different is that in Michelangelo's *Entombment* we do not find the cruel and bloody interpretations, which are often the main feature of many early fourteenth century wooden cross, whether animated or not (**Fig 50**). At the same time, there are several Florentine wooden animated cross sculptures of Christ that do not correspond to their medieval predecessors, so the attention to the rendering of the body was more important than marking the underlying traits of the Passion on his body.

When Alberti used the example of the representation of the dead *Meleager* to visualize his theory, we can agree to the fact that he needed an example, which most likely was not available in Christian art, which is why he used Roman artwork. Obviously, there were already representations of the different moments of the Passion of Christ, but it seems that none of them could match the parameters proposed by Alberti and his *historia*. One aspect of this that has been neglected is the fact that while there was not an artistic example in Christian art that matched Alberti's theory, the action of applying Alberti's *historia* occurred in the liturgy while using these animated sculptures of the crucified Christ. In these liturgies (or paraliturgies), one of the main important traits was the relationship between the viewer and the cult object, as well as the combination of present and past, which is reenacting something in the past and making it present.

Those are aspects that Michelangelo was seeking for his *Entombment*; they were already extant in these liturgies in which the sculptures were involved, though

those elements were not developed and presented in painting. The fact that Michelangelo could have looked at those rituals and considered them for his *Entombement* can be assumed not only because of the representation of Christ that can be linked to the wooden sculptures, but also because they were occurring in his time and therefore contemporary.

I believe that there is an essential misunderstanding about these rituals. In fact, because they established themselves during the Medieval period, we associate them with the Middle Ages or as something strictly “medieval” without acknowledging their capability to adapt and change according to the current times. Michelangelo may well have looked at them as a contemporary devotional experience and not just as something medieval, as would have happened looking at Giotto’s art or the Trecento art production. As a consequence, he would have felt more at ease in using the devotional iconography relying on these rituals versus the artistic production. Proposing again, Giotto visually could have been seen as something out of time according to the aesthetic of the period, but in this case, Michelangelo was relying on what was occurring in Florence in his lifetime. This would have embodied a genuine and “medieval” spirituality and at the same time these rituals guaranteed an adaptation because of their intrinsic capability of renewing themselves over time. So, for the sake of the constant adaptation of these rituals to the devotional and religious need of the period, we can support the idea

that what Michelangelo would have looked at can be considered and perceived as contemporary.

I would propose the idea that Michelangelo wanted to create an altarpiece that embodied the medieval genuine spirituality with the intention of producing something appropriate for the aesthetic and religious change of the period. Even if he wanted to follow Alberti's *historia* for his own purposes, the main issue was not to adapt the Meleager's death representation to a Christian context, but to combine Alberti's principles, seen and acknowledged in the rituals, to this new pictorial concept that was the *Entombment*. Michelangelo was aware that the *historia* was present in these rituals but it had never been attempted in a pictorial level, and this is the challenge that, I argue, Michelangelo faced.

The association of the Christ figure with the iconography of the *Man of Sorrow* (Imago Pietatis) has a connection with Michelangelo's *Entombment*; the frontal representation of Christ and this connection is definitely an aspect of the work that needs to be evaluated to broaden understanding of Michelangelo's work. The problem comes if we consider other aspects that we can find in the painting. It would be incorrect, I believe, to consider the only source of the shift from the traditional image to the development of narrative painting to be other paintings, artworks, or theories, as opposed to the real conditions which constituted the context in which the same subjects represented on canvas were acted or part of an alive and consistent liturgy inside and outside the church. Expanding consideration

to incorporate the social and devotional context would allow the possibility of having a key to understand the painting, as well, in its aim to be both an altarpiece and an example of Christian image-making during the beginning of the fifteenth century.

I am derogating Michelangelo and his time's fascination with the Classical period and possible rejection of what we can consider as medieval, (even if in a very stereotypical way) but we do need to overcome strong prejudices against medieval art, wooden sculptures, and popular devotion and revise them with new perspectives to begin to consider them as part of what we define as art that is thought to have started during the Renaissance period.

I assert that with a deeper consideration and analysis of the production, use and role of animated sculptures of the crucified Christ, or even, more generally, the fixed wooden crucified Christ, we will discover some important elements that will allow us to revise the understanding of art between the Medieval period and the Renaissance. These sculptures had a supreme role in shaping and affecting the devotion during the Medieval period, and particularly since the end of the twelfth century with the diffusion of the groups of the Descent from the Cross, believers started to have a different perception of the body and presence of Christ and how to relate with it. This relationship, I argue, also affected the production of art itself. I propose that the way these sculptures were used created the cultural background for understanding what was represented in painting and how to perceive the

painted Christian message. The action around these sculptures set the behavior and the connection around images as well. Another aspect that will be the subject of the following chapter is that not only was the body of Christ perceived and understood through the sculptural medium, but also that in the paintings, the way Christ was represented was more visually akin to what we can associate with a sculpture than the painted version of it. This demonstrates that it was the sculptural medium which offered the more efficient way to relate with Christ, his body and his Passion, and, most of all, how it was perceived. The pictorial versions of sacred images show that the way Christ was represented was not the real bodily essence of Christ, but his sculptural version which became, overtime, the symbol and the real presence and representation of Christ.

Chapter 5

Christ as “sculpture” and his bodily presence in painting

The Passion of Christ has always been a central moment in Christianity, and the art production related to this moment has had a pivotal role in affecting devotion. The devotion is a dialogue that a believer has with a partner imagined in a particular way that can involve the faithful both singularly or in a collective way.¹ Particularly in the case of artwork that portrays an image as an object of devotion, there is the need to provide a more composite approach than just studying the internal forms, styles, and the variations of the subject through time, or even just the external influence or the way that images adapted themselves to cultural or religious patterns of behavior in their social context.²

Giorgio Vasari's work played a key role in shaping the literature of art history. Vasari is responsible for establishing some of the major conventional ways of discussing and thinking about art which have influenced scholarship on artwork and its role through time. Particularly where art produced in the Medieval period is concerned, his approach emphasized issues of style and authorship, while the content and function of the artwork went largely unexamined. In his introduction

¹ Hans Belting, *L'Arte e il suo Pubblico: Funzione e Forme delle Antiche Immagini della Passione*, (Bologna: Nuova Alfa Editoriale, 1986), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 2.

about the production of wooden sculptures, Vasari argues that “This sort of figures is much used in the Christian religion, seeing that numberless masters have produced many crucifixes and other objects.”³ This indicates that these sculptures were actually used quite often, probably for ritual purposes and devotional practices. At the same time, Vasari expresses a diffidence for this medium, since he himself wrote that “ [...] in truth, one never gives that flesh-like appearance and softness to wood that can be given to metal and to marble and to the sculptured objects that we see in stucco, wax, or clay.”⁴

It is evident that the kind of information he provides and what arguments he makes, especially related to the use of these artworks, might have affected the future study and understanding of these objects. In this case, mentioning the use of the artwork was not a radical change in the critical approach to the study of a particular object, wooden sculptures in this case, but rather a categorization that did not elevate these object to the status of art. It is helpful to remember that when Vasari was writing *The Lives*, churches were undergoing a profound change that affected artworks and their production directly, especially the wooden sculptures.

³ Giorgio Vasari, Louisa S. Maclellan, and G. Baldwin Brown, *Vasari on Technique; Being the Introduction to the Three Arts of Design, Architecture, Sculpture and Painting, Prefixed to the Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (New York: Dover Publications, 1960), 173. “Questa sorte di figure si è usata molto nella cristiana religione, atteso che infiniti maestri hanno fatto molti crocifissi e diverse altre cose”. Original text: Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori* scritte da Giorgio Vasari pittore Aretino con nuove annotazioni e commenti di Gaetano Milanesi, (Firenze: G.C. Sansoni, 1878-85), 31

⁴ *Ibid.*, 173. Translation: “ invero non si dà mai al legno quella carnosità o morbidezza, che al metallo et al marmo et all'altre sculture che noi veggiamo, e di stucchi o di cera o di terra.” Vasari, *Le vite*, 31.

They were often destroyed or discharged because they were considered inappropriate for the new direction promulgated by the church. Often crucifixes were burned since they were already deteriorated from heavy use, and sculptures of saints were destroyed because they were considered indecorous.⁵ Writing about the painting production of the Middle Ages, Vasari also labeled the *Maniera Greca* (the Byzantine style) with a negative judgment since he considered that Cimabue started a new path with painting; he was the first person that contributed to a “*progress*” in art, in a path that culminated with the works of Michelangelo:

“Working next in fresco on the Hospital of the Porcellana, at the corner of the Via Nuova which goes into the Borg' Ognissanti, on the façade which has in the middle the principal door, and making on one[Pg 5] side the Annunciation of the Virgin by the Angel, and on the other Jesus Christ with Cleophas and Luke, figures as large as life, he swept away that ancient manner, making the draperies, the vestments, and everything else in this work, a little more lively and more natural and softer than the manner of these Greeks, all full of lines and profiles both in mosaic and in painting; which manner, rough, rude, and vulgar, the painters of those times, not by

⁵ Elvio, Lunghi, *La Scultura Ligneata in Umbria nel XIII Secolo*, (Foligno: Edizioni Orfini Numeister, 2010),1.

means of study, but by a certain convention, had taught one to the other for many and many a year, without ever thinking of bettering their draughtsmanship, of beauty of colouring, or of any invention that might be good.”⁶

In both cases, either with painting or sculptures, Vasari heavily influenced the approach to studying these objects. However, in relation to painting, while scholars were affected by Vasari’s opinion, soon they departed from the negative approach toward the art that followed the Byzantine style before Cimabue and especially Giotto.

While in this study, I am reevaluating various aspects of the wooden sculptures production in order to have a deeper understanding of the devotional context and to comprehend the role and contribution of these objects toward building the religious experience in the late Medieval period; the focus of this chapter will be on how the body of Christ was represented in painting. I argue, by

⁶ Giorgio Vasari, “Lives of the Most Eminent Painters Sculptors and Architects” newly translated by Gaston Du C. De Vere (London: MacMillan and Co. LD and the Medici Society, LD, 1912-14), 5. Italian Text: “Lavorando poi in fresco allo Spedale del Por-cellana sul canto della via Nuova che va in Borgo Ogni Santi, nella facciata dinanzi che ha in mezzo la porta principale, da un lato la Vergine Annunziata da l'Angelo, e da l'altro Gesù Cristo con Cleofas e Luca, figure grandi quanto il naturale, levò via quella vecchiaia, facendo in quest'opra, i panni, e le vesti, e l'altre cose un poco più vive, e naturali, e più morbide che la maniera di que' Greci, tutta piena di linee e di proffili così nel musaico come nelle pitture; la qual maniera scabrosa e goffa et ordinaria avevan o, non mediante lo studio, ma per una cotal usanza insegnato l'uno all'altro per molti e molti anni i pittori di que' tempi, senza pensar ma i a migliorare il disegno, a bellezza di colorito, o invenzione alcuna che buona fusse.” Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori scritte da Giorgio Vasari pittore Aretino con nuove annotazioni e commenti di Gaetano Milanesi*, (Firenze: Firenze: G.C. Sansoni, 1878-85), 54-55.

providing different examples, that the way the body of Christ on the cross was portrayed and perceived in the pictorial production of the late medieval period was the result of the use of the wooden sculptures and what they were able to embody in the contemporary devotional context.

Scholars that were involved in studying the painted cross between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries focused on and relayed the dichotomy between the *Christus Triumphans* (Triumphant Christ) to the *Christus Patiens* (the Suffering Christ). While Passion images had already existed in the East, the representations of the dead Christ were not fully accepted in the Italian peninsula because they were considered as heretical, despite the closeness with the orthodoxy in representing Christ as dead man⁷. In fact, the adjective *Triumphant* was associated with Christ represented as alive, while, on the contrary, the adjective *Patiens* was associated with his portrayal while suffering or dead on the cross.

This is why in the Italian peninsula there was first the diffusion of the iconography of the *Christus Triumphans* (*Triumphant Christ*) **(Fig 1)**, which lasted until the shift to the *Christus Patiens* (*Suffering Christ*) **(Fig 2)**. This officially happened with the commission by Brother Elia, leader of the Franciscan order to Giunta Pisano, and painted in 1236. However, about fifty years before, there were

⁷ L.H. Grondis, *L'Iconographie Byzantine du Crucifié Mort sur la Croix* (Bruxelles: Société d'Éditions Kemink en Zoon, 1941), 129.

two painted crosses found in Pisa at the beginning of the thirteenth century that are made after an Eastern model⁸ and portray Christ as suffering.

This shift, along with the changes in representing the scenes of the Passion in painted crosses, gathered the attention of the scholarship and determined implicitly the supremacy of painting in art in the late Middle Ages. As a consequence, this also affected our understanding of art and devotion during the late Medieval period in Italy. Images, in this case painted crosses, icons, and altarpieces, were studied to comprehend the religious and devotional context from the eleventh until the fourteenth century. Wooden sculpture production was neglected, taking for granted that wooden sculptures were part of the devotional furnishing of the churches, as simple liturgical objects versus artworks worthy of critical attention. The link of the representation of Christ to the Franciscan order also played a pivotal role in considering the painted cross as the principal medium that helped not only Franciscans, but Dominicans as well in their missionary role during the Middle Ages in affecting and developing the devotion toward the Passion of Christ.

In both the paintings and the sculptures, we find the presence in different places and times of the representation of the Triumphant Christ and the Suffering Christ. In both cases, the representations of Christ seem to follow the same directives. For example, for the Triumphant Christ, the figure is erect in both

⁸ Garrison, *Italian Romanesque*, fig 521 and 524.

painting and sculpture, the head kept up while the eyes are wide open and looking toward the viewer. On the other hand, the Suffering Christ is conceived, obviously, in a different way, almost contrasting totally with the previous example. Overall, the body is a little bit twisted; this detail might have been more accentuated in painting, where the head is bent down and the eyes closed. Despite the appearance of the Suffering Christ in sculpture before painting, at least in the West, both mediums utilized similar iconography in representing these two different and important moments of the interpretation of the divine and human nature of Christ.

Another aspect that can be compared between the two is their position inside the church. Since the early production of wooden crucified Christ and the painted cross, in this case those ones representing the Triumphant Christ, the position of the cross altar and its crucifix, either sculpted or painted, was in *medio ecclesia*⁹ delimiting also the division between the clergy and the faithful. The cross functioned as a reminder and presence of Christ, especially for the sculpted version, because the presence of the Host inside the wooden sculpted cross helped the viewer to facilitate this association. In both sculpture and painting there was a theological intention that explained and supported the presence of the image of Christ. A difference between the two media was that while the sculpture represented only the

⁹ Annika Elisabeth, Fisher, "Cross Altar and Crucifix in Ottonian Cologne, Past Narrative, Present Ritual, Future Resurrection," in *Decorating the Lord's Table: On the Dynamics Between Image and Altar in the Middle Ages* eds Kaspersen, Søren., Thunø, Erik, and Københavns Universitet. Museum Tusulanum (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2006), 54.

figure of Christ, painted crosses were shaped in a way in which there was space to add some scenes of the Passion at the sides of the figure of the crucified Christ. This provided a twofold function: the first was to instruct the faithful about the passion of Christ. This was supported and widely accepted in the Middle Ages in the West after the letter of Pope Gregory to the iconoclastic Bishop Serenus of Marseilles: "Pictures are used in churches so that those who are ignorant of letters may at least read by seeing on the walls what they cannot read in books. [...] To adore images is one thing; to teach with their help what should be adored is another. What Scripture is to educated, images are to the ignorant, who see through them what they must accept; they read in them what they cannot read in books."¹⁰ The second function was the way it provided visual moments for personal meditation. An image worked as either a didactical tool or a spiritual stimulus; it had a function that strictly intertwined with the devotional aspect of the Middle Ages.

However, especially during the late medieval period we assist to a change on the use of images from the official prescription of Saint Gregory. First of all, the formal distinction between *litterati* and *illiterati* did not reflect the complexity of the education in the late medieval period, especially after the diffusion of the mendicant orders and their role in changing the understanding and interaction with religious

¹⁰ Lawrence G. Duggan, "Was Art really the 'Book of Illiterate'?" in *Word & Image* no. 5 (1989), 227. As quoted in Steve B Choate "Devotion and Narrative within the Tradition of the Croce Dipinta" (PhD diss., Florida State University), 21-22. Cite the proper source for Gregory here.

art.¹¹ In addition to that, the role of images in the late medieval devotional context is the result of new forces that express the new religious aspirations that affect both the monastic and the secular world.¹²

Therefore, images had this double role that affected their function, their iconography, as well as their medium. In the first phase of the diffusion of the sculpted and painted version of the crucifixion of Christ, the oldest example in sculpture is a Suffering Christ, and even if later there is a period in which both versions of Christ the Triumphant and the Suffering overlapped, the version of the Suffering Christ prevailed and became the most common way of representing Christ. This shift happened in painting as well, despite happening later than the sculpted counterpart. However, it is important to highlight the changes that affected the painted cross because they raise questions about the essence and the role of the painted crosses themselves. In fact, these changes underline the effectiveness and success of the wooden sculpted version.

The oldest existing painted cross in the Middle Ages is the *Sarzana Crucifix*, **(Fig 3)** made by Maestro Guglielmo, who signed and dated the cross in 1138.¹³ On the apron at the side of the figure of Christ, who is still alive looking at the faithful, there is the representation of the three Maries and John, along with the scenes of the

¹¹ Jeffrey Hamburger, *The visual and the visionary : Art and female spirituality in late medieval Germany* (New York : Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books ; MIT Press, 1998), 112.

¹² Ibidem., 148.

¹³ Garrison, *Italian Romanesque*, fig. 498.

Betrayal, Flagellation, Way to Calvary, Deposition, Entombment, Maries at the Sepulcher; at the *terminals* are Four Evangelists symbols and the busts of Isaiah and Jeremiah, and on the *cimasa* is the Ascension.¹⁴

These kinds of painted crosses, which depict Christ as alive and portray scenes from his Passion close to his body, have been considered as *transnarrational* icons, in which “the various pictorial elements [...] were intended [...] as an effort to lend visual form to this doctrinal abstraction.”¹⁵ In addition, these scenes, along with the central figure of Christ, could have helped the beholder in a compassionate meditation on the life and passion of Christ. The figures on the side of Christ, of the three Marys and John the Evangelist, contributed to the narrative of the scenes, even if we might not need to address those as explicitly part of the overall narrative. They also provided a visual example of how to mourn in front of the image while contemplating the Passion of Christ. The mourning gesture of the Virgin was traced back to Greek and Roman funerary culture and was reutilized and adapted in Christian culture during the Carolingian era in ninth century.¹⁶

What’s interesting for me and for the purpose of this study is to analyze the “development” of the iconography of the Triumphant Christ, and to try to

¹⁴ Ibidem., 194.

¹⁵ Steve B Choate, *Devotion and Narrative* 141-142. In his interesting dissertation, he links this concept of “transnarrational” from Parashall, who used this concept in relation to the images of the Man of Sorrow. Also, Steven Choate mentions how Belting considers the atemporality of a twelfth century Crucifixion icon in the Mount Sinai collection, as “unity of ideas and not a narrative”.

¹⁶ Dorothy Schorr, “The Mourning Virgin and St. John,” *The Art Bulletin*, no. 2 (1940), 63.

understand if there is a relationship between sculpture and the devotional context of the Middle Ages. When I use the word “development,” I do not mean strictly the process of evolution of these crosses, but also the way that they were perceived and changed over time.

In fact, it would be interesting to look at these objects not only in relation to the shift to the Suffering Christ, but also how they were perceived in different time periods despite their initial role and essence. In fact, there is one aspect that reveals the tendency and need, whether conscious or not and on different social levels, of approaching the mystery of the faith as an example of the Incarnation of Christ, with artworks and media that can effectually and practically embody that. If we consider the tradition linked to the painted crosses of the Triumphant Christ, we note that they are associated with miraculous legends. The same Crucifix from Sarzana by Maestro Guglielmo (1138) has been considered as a miraculous cross because of its association with the *Volto Santo* in Lucca (**Fig 4**), a city very close to the small town of Sarzana. It has been proposed that the cross was actually the painted version of the sculpted cross of the *Volto Santo* in Lucca.¹⁷ As claimed by the tradition,

¹⁷ Steve B Choate, *Devotion and Narrative*, 82.

Nicodemus sculpted this work according to the physical aspect of Christ.¹⁸ Because of that, it was considered to be an accurate representation of the true face of Christ, the *Holy Face*.

According to the deacon Leboinus, the tradition holds that an angel informed a Bishop named Gualfredus, impelling him to leave for Jerusalem in order to find this holy image. Bishop Gualfredus put the sculpture on a ship without crew, and despite that, it arrived on the west coast of Italy in the harbor of Luni, a town close Lucca. Bishop Giovanni of Lucca eventually rescued this ship, and the sculpture was displayed in the cathedral of San Martino.¹⁹ This sculpture was one of the most famous images of the Middle Ages. The interesting part of this story is that the painted cross was the counterpart of this famous and miraculous sculpture.²⁰ This was also reiterated by the fact that this painted cross was originally displayed in Luni, the small town that first discovered the sculpture of the *Volto Santo* once it

¹⁸ Niculus di Munkathvera, *Iter ad loca Sancta* 2, 2 in: *Itinera Hiersolymitana Crucesignatorum* (saec. XII-XIII). Vol 2: *Tempore regnum Francorum (1100-1187)* a cura di Sabino De Sandoli, Jerusalem, 1980, 212. As quoted in Michele Bacci, "Nicodemo e il Volto Santo" in *Il Volto Santo in Europa; Culto e Immagino del Crocifisso nel Medioevo: Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Engelberg, 13-16 Settembre 2000*, (Lucca: Istituto Storico Lucchese, 2005), 15. See also for the origin of the Volto Santo (Holy Face): Michele Bacci, "Il Volto Santo come Ritratto Autentico del Salvatore" in *La Santa Croce di Lucca: il Volto Santo: Storia, Tradizioni, Immagini: Atti del Convegno 1-3 Marzo 2001*, (2003): 115-130.

¹⁹ Diana M. Webb. "The Holy Face of Lucca," *Anglo-Norman Studies* no 9 (1986), 228-229 as quoted in Steve B Choate "Devotion and Narrative within the Tradition of the Croce Dipinta" (PhD diss., Florida State University), 83.

²⁰ Clairece Black, "The Origin of the Lucchese Cross Form" *Marsyas*, vol 1 (1941), 36. Black mentions in her article that "the fact that Lucchese cross-and-chalice crucifix had to be inspired by some further circumstance is shown by the total absence of this particular shape in crosses from other centers. Only in Luca was the chalice base employed. Therefore, in Lucca the reason for its use is to be sought. Reconsideration of the Volto Santo, this time as an object of religious worship, suggests that the vultus Domini itself was the direct inspiration for the chalice- base crucifix". Choate, 83. "

arrived in the Italian Peninsula,²¹ stressing even more a common origin. My intention is not to support the idea that painting completely depended on sculpture, but that this example shows an interesting perspective on the relationship between the two media and how painting, at least in this case, had relied on sculpture to provide for its miraculous identity. The idea of this study is to revise the role of sculpture in the making of devotion in the Middle Ages, considering the use of the Descent from the Cross all the way up through the use of the sculpture of Christ with movable arms.

The Miraculous Crucifix of Saint Giovanni Gualberto

Another example that could raise interesting questions on this topic, and specifically about the perception of the period, is another twelfth century-painted cross, the *Crucifix of Saint Giovanni Gualberto* (**Fig 5**). This cross was completely repainted, so it is not clear if the Christ was initially represented as Suffering Christ.²² Alongside the actual structural status of this painted cross, the *San Giovanni Gualberto crucifix* is important for being a miraculous cross. It is, in fact, the cross

²¹ Georg Martin Richter, "The Crucifix of Guilielmus at Sarzana," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, no. 295 (192t), 162. Choate, 83. "The chalice shaped base, formed by the rounded lower contours of the apron and believed to have been inspired by chalice traditionally placed below the right foot of the figure of Christ in the Volto Santo, suggests that the cross was intended to serve as a painted version of the wood image."

²² Garrison, *Italian Romanesque*, fig. 472, 186. Choate, 86.

that miraculously bowed its head to Giovanni Gualberto after he spared his brother's murderer. Giovanni Gualberto (995-1073) was born in Florence from a rich family. A gentlemen of the country murdered his brother. Giovanni was determined to revenge the death of his brother. Once riding back home to Florence on Good Friday, it happened that Giovanni run into the man ho killed his brother in a small street in which it was impossible to avoid each other. So Giovanni hold on his sword and it was ready to kill his enemy. The other man, on the contrary, fell upon on his knees and implored Giovanni by the Passion of Jesus Christ to spare his life. Giovanni was affected by this imploration and especially by thought of Christ that prayed for his murderers. So Giovanni and his enemy embraced each other and they walk to the monastery of St. Miniato, of the holy Order of St. Bennet. In this church, while they were praying together the crucifix miraculously bowed its head to him, as it were accepting both the sacrifice of Giovanni's resentment and the sincere repentance of Giovanni's enemy. This divine gesture, impressed so much Giovanni that asked the abbot to be admitted to the religious order he belonged to.²³ As was custom in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, San Giovanni Gualberto and some scenes from his life were represented in altarpieces. In one of the scenes of Giovanni Gualberto's life, painted by Giovanni del Biondo and dated at the end of the

²³ For the complete story of the life of Saint Giovanni Gualberto see: Butler Alban, *The Lives of the Fathers, Martyrs, and Other Principal Saints Compiled from Original Monuments, and other Authentic Records*. (London: 1756), volume VII, July 12. Choate, 84-85.

fourteenth century and beginning of the fifteenth (**Fig 6**), there is one part that refers to the miraculous moment in which the cross bends toward Giovanni as a sign of approval after his gesture. This part of the life of Giovanni Gualberto was painted by Lorenzo di Niccolò (**Fig 7**). In this case, Lorenzo di Niccolò portrayed faithfully what could have happened. In fact, he represented Giovanni Gualberto and his brother's murder in front of the cross, and the miraculous image was represented on the painted cross. Specifically in this painting, the painted cross is shown as bending down in order to stress the gesture of Christ as bowing his head as a sign of approval. The accuracy of the narrative does not match, however, with the iconography of the cross. In fact, it has been acknowledged that the cross, despite heavily repainted, must have been one of the examples of the Triumphant Christ,²⁴ while the cross painted in the panel in the Bardi Chapel in Santa Croce in Florence by Giovanni del Biondo shows the typology of the Suffering Christ. The cross might have been repainted in 1448 when it was placed in a tabernacle sculpted by Michelozzo, or even in 1671 when it was transferred to Santa Trinità.²⁵ When this panel was repainted, the original miraculous cross was most likely still representing the Triumphant Christ. The fact that the Triumphant Christ was replaced by a suffering Christ shows the devotional taste of the period, drawing more attention to

²⁴ Garrison, *Italian Romanesque*, fig. 472, pag 186. Choate, 86.

²⁵ Choate, 85. Steven Choate quotes in his dissertation some unpublished notes by Garrison.

the human side of Christ and his physical presence instead his divine presence. The artist was accurate in keeping the painted cross as part of the miracle, but at the same time he chose a bodily and human version of Christ; he focused on Christ's physicality, despite the miraculous nature of the moment. In this case, there is both the intention of representing the real fact according to the historical account and a bodily representation of Christ. The artist could have been influenced in his choice by the devotional culture of the period, and especially in this case by the Dominicans. In fact, there is a painted cross of the Suffering Christ (**Fig 8**) in the Church of San Domenico in Prato, in which some Byzantine elements match with this new sensibility in representing Christ as human, dead on the cross.

There are other paintings that witness the miraculous moment in the life of Giovanni Gualberto. However, while it is very easy to recognize the moment and link it to Saint Giovanni Gualberto's life, at the same time there is a significant change that is symptomatic of the religious and devotional context of the period during which it was painted.

One of the parts of the panel painting found by Maestro della pala di San Niccolò in the church of San Miniato al Monte in Florence shows the moment in which Giovanni Gualberto receives the miraculous sign while he was standing in front of the cross with his brother's murderer (**Fig 9**). In fact, this panel depicts Giovanni's man holding the two horses at the entrance, Giovanni Gualberto right in

the center pointing with his finger toward Christ, and the man that killed Gualberto's brother kneeling in front of the altar. In this case, the cross is bending toward the two beholders as a sign of approval. What is different from Lorenzo di Niccolò's version is that the Maestro di San Niccolò represented Christ in the form of a sculpture rather than a painted cross, as the historical account had reported. Not only was Christ not depicted according to the iconography of the Triumphant Christ, but he was represented with another medium that resembles sculpture. In fact, according to the painting, the figure of Christ can clearly be associated with an example of wooden sculpture of the crucified Christ that was probably very easy to find in the churches during that period, as part of the main altar or as part of the altar in one of the chapels dedicated to the cross. Just as in the previous example in which the Triumphant Christ was substituted by the version of the Suffering Christ, in this painting the choice of representing Christ as sculpture manifests even more this idea of the humanity, body, and presence of Christ. The Maestro di San Niccolò's choice can thus be considered from two different perspectives. If the clergy commissioned the panel, we can assume that the portrayed scene reflected their will, either as an institution or for devotional purposes. On the other hand, if they just commissioned the panel from the artist, giving him freedom to work on the story (obviously according to the established iconography linked to the Saint Gualberto), it is possible to note a conscious choice in portraying Christ in his bodily

essence through sculpture even while still using painting. It seems that an awareness spread in acknowledging sculpture, and in this case wooden sculpture, as the “elected” medium with which to present Christ in the late Medieval period. In the case of the scene from the life of Giovanni Gualberto, it would not have been a problem to show the miraculous crucifix as a painted cross. This would have been faithful to the tradition and the original image. However, the actual variation that occurred in this panel is the presence of Christ as sculpture. A third reason for this choice could have been the social and religious context of the period, in which sculpture was publicly accredited as the medium that could induce the most visceral relationship when representing the humanity of Christ. In addition, the miraculous nature of Christ was catalyzed by his physical incarnation, presence, and essence. In another panel painting, as part of the *predella*, there is the same scene of the Saint Giovanni Gualberto in which Christ is clearly presented in the sculptural medium **(Fig 10)**. The artist is an anonymous Florentine painter, working in the fourteenth century. Even if the size does not reflect the traditional size of a sculpture that could have been part of the altarpiece in a medieval church, the choice of the sculptural medium is still indicative of the artist’s preference to make it more efficient for the viewer. There is even another panel from the life of San Giovanni Gualberto **(Fig 11)** that shows another moment in which he probably embraced the religious life with

the presence of friars along with him. While the context seems different it seems that it is the same as the cross that Saint Giovanni Gualberto is bowing in front of.

These are three cases from the life of San Giovanni Gualberto, and if it was just one case probably it could have been difficult to raise questions and make a considerable case out of it. However, the existence of further examples in which the vision of a Saint or a miraculous painted image was presented throughout sculpture seems to confirm how sculpture was more relatable in presenting Christ in both his human and divine nature, according to the late medieval religious context.

The Vision of Saint Thomas Aquinas

Another case is the *Vision of Saint Thomas Aquinas* by Sassetta, painted in 1426-27) (**Fig 12**). According to the tradition, when Saint Thomas was praying in the Chapel of Saint Nicholas, he was seen by the sacristan to be levitating in prayer before the icon of the crucified Christ (**Fig 13**); Christ said to Saint Thomas: “You have written well of me, Thomas. What reward would you have for your labor?”, and Thomas answered: “Nothing but you Lord.”²⁶ This miraculous event happened in

²⁶ Guilelmus de Tocco, and Claire Le Brun-Gouanvic, *Ystoria Sancti Thome de Aquino de Guillaume de Tocco (1323)*, (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1996), 162. “*Et accedens retro in cappella Sancti Nicholai, ubi fixus in oratione manebat, subito audiuit de loco ad quem predictus doctor conuersus erat ad orandum cum lacrimis, huiusmodi uocem de ymagine crucifixi*” “*Thoma, bene scripsisti de me, quam recipies a me pro tue labore mercedem?*” *Qui respondit: “Domine, non nisi te”*.

1273²⁷, and Sassetta painted the event in 1426-27. A reproduction of the icon is still visible today, and most likely it was also visible during the middle of the fifteenth century while Sassetta was working on his painting. Sassetta painted Christ in a full tridimensional body; this can be associated even indirectly with the sculptural medium. We might argue that if the painting by Sassetta represents Christ as real body, as real human being, without having any direct reference to any sculpture, Christ would have functioned as a sort of a metaphor of himself, considering that his presence would have been both physical and metaphysical. However, the visualization of this painting would have had solicited the beholder to refer to Christ through a sculpture, and the sculpture itself would have provided a sense of both the metaphor of Christ and, paradoxically, Christ himself in both the physical and metaphysical sense. This argument will be developed more in the following part of this study. Nonetheless, the point here is that despite the fact that the miraculous image was once more represented through painting, the artist was not faithful in providing the exact medium with which Saint Thomas had the spiritual connection. In representing Christ the way he did, he implicitly confirmed that the sculptural medium was more suitable, especially in the period in which Sassetta was working. Even in a later artwork which portrays the miracle of the vision of Saint Thomas, painted by Santi di Tito in 1593 in the del Turco Chapel in the Church of San Marco

²⁷ Garrison, *Italian Romanesque*, fig 611, 224.

in Florence (**Fig 14**), the painting shows the miracle as a tableau vivant in which the painting provides the physical presence of Christ and the other saints around him in a very efficacious way. Physicality is the premium attribute in the representation of Christ, and because of that the reference to sculpture and its devotional use is a constant present in painting as well. What the painting suggests is not only an account of the vision of Saint Thomas, but also a solicitation to a relationship with Christ that refers to his humanity that is most efficiently expressed by sculpture, or more specifically wooden sculpture, for its capability to be painted, which then affected its likeness and movability as well.

The case of the representation of Stigmatization of Saint Catherine of Siena

The representation of the stigmatization of Saint Catherine of Siena (1347 – 1380) offers another example of the role of sculpture in providing an idea of both physicality and miraculous essence. According to the tradition, Saint Catherine of Siena had her first supernatural vision when she was six years old, in which she experienced the vision of Christ blessing and sitting in a throne among saints.²⁸

²⁸ Dizionario Biografico, *Santa Caterina da Siena*, http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/caterina-da-siena-santa_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/ (accessed July 1, 2015).

During her life she experienced numerous visions, which were recorded by the leading member of the Dominican order Raymond of Capua. The artist Giovanni di Paolo (1403-1482) represented some of her visions in different panel paintings during the fifteenth century. For example there is an image of *Saint Catherine dictating her dialogues to Raymond of Capua* (**Fig 15**) or *Saint Catherine receiving the Holy Communion* directly by Christ during a mass (**Fig 16**) In both cases, Saint Catherine is having a vision, and the artist Giovanni di Paolo found a way to make a transcendent experience visible, which it is essentially otherwise indescribable and unrepresentable. The artist presented Christ in a similar way in both cases: half-length size, coming from a radiant cloud and connecting spiritually and “physically” with Saint Catherine. Also in other panels made by Giovanni di Paolo is Christ represented in the same way, like for example *The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine* (**Fig 17**). Giovanni di Paolo made also two more panels referring to other miraculous moments of the life of Saint Catherine that are interesting for the ongoing argument of this study. The two painted panels I am referring to are: *Catherine Beseaching Christ to Resuscitate her Mother* (**Fig 18**) and *Sainte Catherine Receiving the Stigmata* (**Fig 19**). In the first painted panel Saint Catherine kneels while praying in front of what we can consider a sculpture of the crucified Christ. While the painting works as a visual document and is an intermediary for the viewer, at the same time what triggers the vision in the personal and visionary

experience of Saint Catherine is a sculpture. Specifically, in this panel painting there is a combination of the supernatural presence of Christ and his physical presence throughout the most efficient medium in this matter, which is sculpture. The panel painting does not provide only a “historical” account on one of the miraculous moments of the life of Saint Catherine, but “it takes on the role of witness to the visionary act and is therefore capable of testifying to the actual reality of the apparition, although neither the visionary himself nor the witness seeing [her] ecstasies could confirm or deny absolutely the reality of the vision.”²⁹ At the same time, what belongs to reality, to the visible, and to what Saint Catherine is referring to, is a sculpted image of Christ. In the dynamic of the panel, Christ is represented twice. The first representation is the sculpted one, the real and the physical version of Christ, and second is the ethereal version, represented through radiant golden rays of light and clouds as symbols of his hierophany. The dynamic of the painting suggests that the beginning process for this miraculous apparition starts from the prayer and contemplation in front of the sculpture, of which the viewer would have been totally aware. The artist himself choose to portray Christ through the sculptural medium, probably aware that the beholder would have had a more sympathetic relationship with a more tangible figure of Christ in order to arrive to

²⁹ Victor Ieronim Stoichiță, *Visionary Experience in the Golden Age of Spanish Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 1995), 198.

his metaphysical nature. The artist would have also considered the devotional context around him during fifteenth century Siena, and the choice of the sculpture could have reflected that, even in relation to the Dominican religious order.

The other painting I want to discuss is a panel painted by Giovanni di Paolo in relation to the life of Saint Catherine of Siena. This painted panel is *Saint Catherine of Siena Receiving the Stigmata* (1447-65) **(Fig 19)**. According to the tradition, Catherine was in Pisa, by request of Pope Gregory XI, in order to convince the lords of the city to join the anti-papacy league. As specified in the *Legenda Maior* by Raymond of Capua, on the 1 of April 1375 she confided her vision to him after she received the communion: “I saw the Lord fixed to the cross coming towards me in a great light, and such was the impulse of my soul to go and meet its Creator that it forced the body to rise up. Then from the scars of His most sacred wounds I saw five rays of blood coming down towards me, to my hands, my feet and my heart. Realizing what was to happen, I exclaimed, ‘O Lord God, I beg you-do not let these scars show on the outside of my body!’ As I said this, before the rays reached me their colour changed from blood red to the colour of light, and in the form of pure light they arrived at the five points of my body, hands, feet and heart.”³⁰

³⁰ Raymond of Capua, “Acta Sanctorum, April, III, 910” in *Legenda Maior*, translation by George Lamb, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena*, (New York 1960), 175- 6.

The cross in front of which Saint Catherine was praying exists still today and it is in the Santuario Cateriniano in Siena **(Fig 20)**. This is a painted cross of the genre of the *Triumphant Christ* made by an artist from Pisa around 1150-1200.³¹ As in the case of San Giovanni Gualberto, the miracle happened in front of a painted image, but the artist who reported the miracle of Saint Catherine opted for a crucified Christ, one that can be associated with a contemporary example of wooden sculpture **(Fig 21)**. The body position of Saint Catherine recalls very clearly the body posture of Saint Francis on Mount Verna while receiving the stigmata **(Fig 22)**. Without entering in the middle of the historical quarrel between Dominicans and Franciscans about Saint Catherine's stigmata that were confirmed only in 1630 by Pope Urban VIII, it is important for this study to consider this miraculous moment for another purpose. In fact, the problem is not about the truthfulness of the stigmata, but rather about how this moment was represented throughout painting in the middle of the fifteenth century and more or less eighty years after the real fact happened. According to the tradition, the Sienese Saint received the stigmata on 1375 while she was kneeling in front of a cross that is well known and these wounds of Christ were visible only to herself.³² However, the artist presented it in a completely different context, which raises some interesting questions. Even if he

³¹ Garrison, fig 509, pag 196.

³² Suzanne, Noffke, *The dialogue*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 5.

had knowledge of the painted cross in front of which the miracle happened, the artist did not represent it at all, not even through a symbolic reference. It seems to be a golden cross positioned in the middle of the altar, but the miraculous event is represented as a sculpted representation of Christ leaning over the altar toward Saint Christina. It is not possible to see the rays from the body of Christ piercing the body of Saint Christina, as it has been reported that she asked for the wounds to be invisible. However, her body posture indicates that she was in the act of receiving the stigmata, matching the pose of the crucified Christ and the iconography of Saint Francis receiving the stigmata.

Giovanni di Paolo made a specific choice in representing a lifelike crucifix, and I would like to consider some general and hypothetical assumptions in order to raise some questions and arrive to a conclusion. Let's suppose, for example, that in the Italian religious context of the fifteenth century there were only panel paintings or painted crosses that portrayed Christ or any other holy person, without any use of sculpted form. The crucified Christ in *Saint Catherine of Siena receiving the Stigmata* would have functioned still as a tridimensional presence of Christ, but the metaphysical presence and the experience of the image of Christ would have been a transcendent experience in its representational form. Instead, considering the religious context of the fifteenth century in Tuscany or in general even the center of Italy in which the use of wooden polychrome sculptures was widespread for

devotional and liturgical purposes, I suggest that while the painting refers to the life of Saint Catherine with regards to the presence of Christ, it clearly also refers to sculpture. As a consequence, the painting also becomes a visual reminder of the religious and devotional context of the period. The artist did not see in person the original crucifix in which Saint Christina had the miraculous apparition and reception, and he relied solely on the literary account on the supernatural event where Catherine was kneeling after a *crucifix*³³ after she received communion, or according to the directions of his patrons. At the same time he nonetheless chose a volumetric likeness of Christ, showing that his sensibility was oriented toward a tridimensional form versus the painted form in revealing the presence, as body, of Christ. Even if we might consider that the cross became alive, just for the moment of the stigmatization, there is no sign of a presence of a painted cross or of the passage from painting to becoming alive. For the beholder or the faithful, the Christ portrayed by Giovanni di Paolo could have been associated with a polychrome wooden sculpture.

The painting by Giovanni di Paolo is not the only one that chooses to portray Christ in the moment of the stigmatization of Saint Catherine of Siena through a tridimensional form. An anonymous Sienese painter (**Fig 23**) shows clearly that the

³³ Barbara Pike Gordley, "A Dominican Saint for the Benedictines: Beccafumi's Stigmatization of St Catherine," *Zeitschrift Fur Kunstgeschichte*. no 55 (1992) 396.

crucified Christ is not a painted cross, aligning himself in the same mental category of Giovanni di Paolo and religious environment.

In fact, since production the Descent from the Cross, and especially since the sculptures of Christ were made with movable arms, these polychrome wooden sculptures were made in order to be liturgically used in processions and reenactments of the Passion of Christ in a way that encouraged the faithful to believe that the sculpture of Christ was the real body of Christ. Making the sculpture life-size, painting it, and paying special attention to the anatomy of the body, including the use of real hair or a beard, confirms the special role of these objects: that they were not a fictitious presence, but a real presence for the faithful.³⁴

There is one painting that portrays the stigmatization of Saint Catherine in which the crucifix from which Catherine is receiving the stigmata is a painted cross. This painting by the artist Rutilio Manetti shows a more faithfulness to the historical tradition **(Fig 24)**.³⁵

A further example that I want to bring up before analyzing the role of Franciscans in this relationship between sculpture and painting is the *De Modo*

³⁴ This style, along with the liturgical use of these sculptures will be the object of a more in depth analysis in the following chapter of this study.

³⁵ The artist is Rutilio Manetti and his *Santa Caterina Riceve le Stimmate dal Crocifisso* was painted in 1630. However, since the date of production of this painting does not correspond directly with the time period I am considering for this study, I believe that, while the artwork would raise interesting art historical questions, it is not relevant for the purpose of the present analysis. This is historicizing in replicating archaic style, which it was very much part of its own time.

Orandi corporaliter sancti Dominici, a book that in one of his different versions, the text is combined with different illustrations that show the various ways of praying, suggested by Saint Dominic.³⁶ The text is principally focused on the way of praying and on emotional status, along with the mystical consciousness in nine different inner states that correspond to nine different gestures **(Fig 25)**.

It is interesting, however, to see how this illuminator, working around the year 1400, represented Saint Dominic in the different stages of mystical consciousness. He portrays Saint Dominic in front of an altarpiece in which, along with a panel painting on the back, there is a volumetric representation of the body of Christ that seems to be coming alive and spilling blood while Saint Dominic prays before it. One of the main differences between Franciscans and Dominicans was that Franciscans, as it happened with Francis himself, did not presume that priestly order was necessary. In fact, the minor Friars could preach only repentance or penitence without presenting or dealing with complex issues related to the dogma.³⁷ On the other hand, Dominicans were more inclined to preach against heresy and

³⁶ On the *De Modo Orandi Corporaliter Sancti Dominici* and its translation see Simon Tugwell "The Nine Ways of Prayer of Saint Dominic: A Textual Study and Critical Edition," *Medieval Studies* 47 (1985): 1-124; Illustrations: Ms Rossiano 3 of the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana. For the analysis of the illustrations see: William Hood: "Saint Dominic's Manners of Praying: Gestures in Fra Angelico's Cell Frescoes at S. Marco." *The Art Bulletin* 68, no. 2 (1986): 195-206.

Miklós Boskovits, *Immagini da Meditare: Ricerche su Dipinti di Tema Religioso nei Secoli XII-XV* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1994) 82. See also on the subject: Richard T. Trexler, *The Christian at Prayer, An Illustrated Prayer Manual, Attributed to Peter the Chanter (d. 1197)*, (Binghampton, 1988).

³⁷ William Hood, "Saint Dominic's Manneras of Praying: Gestures in Fra Angelico's Cell Frescoes at S. Marco," *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 68, no. 2 (1986): 197.

therefore needed to be educated in philosophy and theology to be eligible for priestly ordination.³⁸ Obviously, this distinction between the two Mendicant Orders was particularly significant only at the beginning of the development of both Franciscans and Dominicans, at the same time that the visual arts were instruments for reflecting their different attitudes toward catechesis.³⁹ While Franciscans used mostly art to awaken a sympathetic relationship with Christ and his suffering, Dominicans, considering for example also other artworks used for their purposes such as the frescos at San Marco in Florence, used visual art to enhance “a theological relationship, whether mystical, moral or dogmatic.”⁴⁰ At the same time, even if the *De Modo Orandi* focuses on the different body postures that can stimulate mystical consciousness, we can see how this is happening in front of what can be associated with a sculpture of Christ in his corporeal element.

It could be possible to question the clear association between what we see portrayed in paintings and sculpture, like in the cases previously mentioned. At the same time, this connection is not just stylistic and based on “resemblance,” but it also considers the religious context and the liturgical use and diffusion of these wooden sculptures within the Late Medieval and Early Renaissance religious society. Along with more art historical categories such as iconography and style, it is

³⁸ Ibidem., 197.

³⁹ Ibidem., 197.

⁴⁰ Ibidem., 197.

this religious context that most clearly elucidates the role of the sculptural medium in the making of the devotion during the Middle Ages and early Renaissance. The purpose of this study is not to express a judgment, either positive or negative, even according to what a contemporary theologian might have expressed toward the use of images. Instead, what is more relevant is how we understand the changing relationship between the images, whether they are painted or sculpted images, and the beholder, or the person that prays in front of it. Specifically for this study, it is important to refine the role of sculpture in this changing process.

Even if we look at the Franciscans we will find elements that will clarify the role of sculpture, and its constant presence, in late medieval artistic and religious context in Italy. However, Franciscans also associated themselves officially with painting and scholarship connected the mendicant order to the production of painting and the role of painting in the late Medieval period. At the same time, i will argue that the initial avoidance in using sculptures within the Franciscan order had a specific and “political” reason.

According to the tradition, while in prayer in the church of San Damiano in Assisi, Saint Francis heard the Cross speaking to him, telling him “Francis, go and repair my house which, as you can see, is falling into ruins.” This episode represents probably the most important moment for Saint Francis’ conversion, and it happened in front of a painted cross, dated around 1100 (**Fig 26**). The cross became a very

important venerated image that might have influenced other “talking cross” experiences, like that one of Saint Catherine of Siena.⁴¹ This cross was moved from the church of San Damiano to the Church of Saint Clare of Assisi, and it was replicated in one of the scenes that present the life of Saint Francis in the Upper Basilica in Assisi (**Fig 27**). At the same time, even before the version in Assisi, there is an altarpiece attributed to the Tuscan artist Rinaldo da Siena that portrays scenes from the Life of Saint Francis (**Fig 28**). The scene that shows the Cross in San Damiano speaking to Saint Francis is very different from the version in the Basilica in Assisi. In fact, while in Assisi, there is an accurate rendering of the original painted cross, in the version by Rinaldo da Siena (**Fig 29**)⁴² Christ is represented as a real body and not just in his painted rendering, and while he is speaking to Saint Francis, he stretches his arms to reach Saint Francis. This gesture, which recalls the *amplexus* of Saint Bernard, suggests at the same time a physical interaction, even where a miracle happened and there was a painting and Christ revealed himself through words. This simple scene from the panel painting of Saint Francis and scenes of his life shows again how the perception of Christ and his presence would become more physical and be perceived and represented as such, despite the reality involved a painted cross.

⁴¹ Choate, 89, see note 189.

⁴² Bruno Toscano, “Dieci Immagini al tempo di Angela” in *Dal visibile all'indicibile: crocifissi ed esperienza mistica in Angela da Foligno* Bassetti, ed Massimiliano, and Bruno Toscano (Spoleto: Fondazione Centro italiano di studi sull'alto Medioevo, 2012), 95-117.

Despite the miraculous event that was linked to the cross and the life of Saint Francis, this moment was not considered as important as the reception of the stigmata that happened to Saint Francis while praying to the Mount Verna at the end of his earthly life. This moment of the life of Saint Francis stressed even more his willingness to live and feel the real suffering of Christ throughout his body; this affected the latter Franciscans religious mindset toward the Passion of Christ. Their attention to the suffering of Christ justified and supported the shift, as previously mentioned, from the Triumphant Christ to the Suffering Christ. The *Stigmatization* was the supreme sign of the theme of Saint Francis's imitation of Christ, and this affected the art production as well. As I mentioned, since the beginning, Franciscans did not seem to have any connection with the use of sculpture, or more specifically wooden sculptures. At the same time, since the reception of the stigmata by Saint Francis, more attention began to be paid by the Franciscans themselves in stressing the physicality of Saint Francis' experience and the physicality in the representation of Christ as well.

The fact that Franciscans did not use sculptures in order to promote this new physical and sympathetic relationship with Christ, especially after the remarkable experience of Saint Francis receiving the stigmata, is attributed to the problematic use of sculptures during the Middle Ages. In fact, despite the existence and the use of these objects for liturgical purposes, there was still some uncertainty by the

ecclesiastical authorities in relation to the wooden sculptures. Franciscans were a relatively new religious order and had a good relationship with three popes Innocent III, Honourius III and Gregory IX. Also “the succeeding popes played a central role in promoting and channeling the friar’s ministry.”⁴³ Considering the miraculous nature of what their spiritual leader experienced in the Mount Verna and in virtue of Franciscan’ relationship with the papacy I imply that an explicit and unfiltered use of sculptures would have been a risky move that could have jeopardized the whole order and create trouble with the existent connection with the popes.

The stigmata of Saint Francis and the shift promoted by the Franciscans themselves toward the Suffering Christ were already important choices in shaping the spiritual directions of the order. The role of Saint Bonaventure was pivotal not only for the Franciscan devotion itself, but also in the way he promoted devotion, relying on a vivid application of the senses and an imaginative recreation of the scene in a way that the faithful was both a witness and a participant.⁴⁴ Especially in the *Three of Life*, Bonaventure uses the senses to imagine the scene from the life of Christ, referring to a wide range of emotions. This way of living the faith has often been problematic, especially in relation to the sculptural medium and, above all, in

⁴³ Michael J. P. Robson, *The Franciscans in the Middle Ages*. Monastic Orders. (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK; Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2006), 69.

⁴⁴ Bonaventure and Ewert H. Cousins, *Bonaventure* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 35.

correspondence with wooden sculptures, an aspect that will be explored later in this study.

This is why the use of painted cross would have still connected Franciscans to the tradition without risking an inappropriate use of images along with the promotion of the figure of Saint Francis as the *Alter Christus*. In fact, considering the emotional and devotional impact of Saint Francis' stigmatization and the stress on the physicality of the experience, the use of sculptures could have enhanced the focus on the body and as a consequence to the sculptural object, which could have become the focus of this new way of living the relationship with the sacred and the body of Christ.

However, looking at the use of images by the Franciscan order, it is possible to notice that since the beginning and especially throughout time there was an inclination toward sculpture that matched, I believe, their devotional ideals even more. This one can be noted also through the observation of the iconographical changes that affected the representation of the Suffering Christ as well, even if they do not relate directly to the Franciscan order.

First of all, the stigmata received by Saint Francis and the depiction of Christ as *Christus Patiens* put direct emphasis on the suffering of Christ as a consequence of his human nature, especially underlining the body as the preferred medium within which to understand and live the Christian message. The presence of the Virgin

Mary and John the Evangelist would have showed how to mourn in front of the dead body of Christ. They offered an example of how to behave, and this is also indicative of a new self-consciousness on the part of the faithful in learning how to live and participate in the Passion of Christ. Also, this new dimension was embodied by these painted crosses, in which Christ was portrayed as a dead Christ (**Fig 30**). Since the diffusion of these crosses, the viewer could face a more human representation of Christ, in which Christ embodied suffering and death as well. This new iconography of the dead Christ spread out at first in Umbria and Tuscany, and it kept the same iconographical pattern until Giotto. Giotto contributed with an innovative and more naturalistic interpretation of the human body with his Cross in Santa Maria Novella in Florence (**Fig 31**). He changed the extreme bodily tension of the dead Christ (**Fig 32**) with a quiet relaxation of the body with a more attentive anatomical description.

With this new interpretation of the dead Christ, Giotto provided a new quality of the devotional image, and for the first time in history he painted a man, a real man, on the cross.⁴⁵ Art historians have considered Giotto a great innovator, above all in comparison with his Master Cimabue, acknowledging that a change of this magnitude was rare in the history of art.⁴⁶ The comparison between Cimabue

⁴⁵ Giovanni Previtali, *Giotto e la Sua Bottega* (Milano, Fabbri, 1967), 31.

⁴⁶ Milo Boskovits, "Giotto un Artista poco Conosciuto?" in *Giotto - Bilancio Critico di Sessant'Anni di Studi e Ricerche* (Firenze, Giunti: 2000), 75.

and Giotto has been a widely studied topic among art historians, stressing mostly the striking difference between the two crosses. While Cimabue's cross was considered more naturalistic than others painted earlier, once compared with the incredible realism that characterizes Giotto's cross, it assumes a symbolic dimension.⁴⁷ However, even if the comparison stresses the remarkable difference between the two, it does not explain the origin of Giotto's crucifix, nor does it clarify the source that Giotto worked from.

Art historians, from Giorgio Vasari to more contemporary scholars, have considered Giotto as the first Renaissance painter, the artist that anticipated the pursuit of a naturalistic approach to representation based on observation: "In my opinion painters owe to Giotto, the Florentine painter, exactly the same debt they owe to nature, which constantly serves them as a model and whose finest and most beautiful aspects they are always striving to imitate and reproduce. For after many years during which the methods and outlines of good painting had been buried under the ruins caused by wars Giotto alone who, by God's favor, rescued and

⁴⁷ Bruce Cole, *Giotto and Florentine Painting 1280-1375*, (New York: Harper & Row:1976), 31. "The basic conception of the two Christ figures is strikingly different. Cimabue's, although more naturalistic than anything produced up to time, seems symbolic when compared with the stark realism of Giotto's, where the vestiges of the old abstraction have been done away with and the spectator is confronted with the awesome image of a dead, greenish Christ hanging from a cross. No longer does the figure share the majestic iconic conception of even the last of Cimabue's Christs. The remote, heroic Son of God has been replaced by a very human image of a dead man divested of all the old associations of hierarchical grandeur which date back to the very beginning of Florentine art".

restored the art, even though he was born among incompetent artists.”⁴⁸ In his part of the Lives dedicated to Giotto, Vasari mentions how Cimabue influenced him and how, at the same time, he eclipsed the same Cimabue with his art. Giotto also gained respect and praise among his contemporaries. Notorious is the passage from the canto XI in the Dante Alighieri’s Purgatory: “Cimabue thought To lord it over painting’s field; and now The cry is Giotto’s and his name eclipsed”. The greatness of Giotto was not only in overcoming and displacing the so-called *Maniera Greca*, in which Cimabue was the Master, but in developing a naturalistic approach in which the observation of nature and the use of light was pivotal. This innovation anticipated the artistic approach of the Renaissance. The way that scholarship shaped the understanding of Late Medieval and Renaissance art is the result and influence of the interpretation of Giotto’s achievements and the related literature. Nobody would challenge Giotto’s artistic importance and influence. However, I believe that it is possible to consider Giotto’s artistic results from another perspective, which will not bring into question his artistic achievement and greatness, but rather would contextualize the role of late Medieval art and how artistic production affected devotion in a different way. As mentioned before, we know that Giotto overcame Cimabue, but it was always a source of confusion as to

⁴⁸ Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, a selection translated by George Bull (England: The Chaucer Press, 1965), 57.

the origin of Giotto's art: "Although the origins of Giotto's style can be assumed to be in Cimabue's Florence, they have been so assimilated and transformed by his visual genius that they are almost unrecognizable [...]. There is no precise answer as to where Giotto's early style came from [...] The reason for the great difference between Giotto's art and that of his most immediate forerunners is an unsolved mystery".⁴⁹ In order to understand this mystery and find the sources of Giotto's art, the horizon of research has to be expanded to go beyond the territory that involves only panel paintings or frescos. A remarkable approach in this case that opens further and noteworthy interpretations is the approach by the Austrian art historian Gerhard Schmidt. He attributes a fundamental role to sculpture for influencing Giotto's artistic production. He challenges Vasari's interpretation of Giotto by arguing that the real intention of Giotto was not a pure and direct naturalism, but a convincing representation of the volumes. This dimension could have been explored during his time only through the observation of sculpture.⁵⁰ This would support even more logically the attention and the use of light in his works, especially the orientation of the position of the figures in the frescos of Scrovegni Chapel in Padua. In fact, in the Arena Chapel "the light from a window corresponds to the fall of the

⁴⁹ Bruce Cole, *Giotto and Florentine Painting 1280-1375*, 44.

⁵⁰ Gerhard Schmidt, "Giotto und die gotische Skulptur. Neue Überlegungen zu einem alten Thema" in *Römische Historische Mitteilungen*, n. XX (Wien: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press: 1979), 136-37. Quoted also in Max Seidel, "Il Crocifisso Grande che Fece Giotto. Problemi Stilistici" in *Giotto: la Croce di Santa Maria Novella*, (Firenze: Edifir: 2001), 65-158.

pictorial light and the direction of the modeling light on the side walls of the chapel coincides with the window in the western, or entrance, wall of the building".⁵¹ Schmidt supports the idea that the medieval sculptor Arnolfo di Cambio could have been for Giotto more important than Cimabue. Like Giotto, other painters might have looked at and admired sculptures; however it seems that none of them besides Giotto had the intention along with the skill and capability to develop the sculptural effect in painting through the use of light.⁵²

Even if the influential role and importance of Arnolfo di Cambio was widely known in the medieval artistic milieu, it cannot be confirmed that his role was more important than Cimabue for Giotto, which is the argument that Schmidt relies on. However, this does not mean that the relationship between Giotto and sculpture does not exist or cannot be pursued. A stimulating observation about the relationship between Giotto and sculpture has been considered in the art production of Giovanni Pisano.⁵³ Especially after the recent work of restoration that contributed to observing the wooden sculpture in the Duomo in Pisa in its original state (**Fig 33**), it is possible to note a relation. Therefore, Giovanni Pisano's work

⁵¹ Julia Miller I., "Symbolic Light in Giotto and the Early Quattrocento in Florence" *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 5 (1), 1985, 8. Other sources on the subject are J. White, *The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space* (New York: 1957), p. 58, and L. Schneider, *Giotto in Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: 1974), p. 18; also *Giotto: The Arena Chapel Frescoes*, ed. J. Stubblebine (New York: 1969), and C. Gnudi, *Giotto* (Milan: 1958), pp. 105 f.

⁵² Schmidt, *Giotto*, 136-37.

⁵³ Max Seidel, *Il Crocifisso Grande che fece Giotto*, 74.

must have played a decisive role in connecting and transforming the representation of Christ from Cimabue to Giotto.⁵⁴ This connection is supported also by the chronology. In fact, around 1270-80 Giovanni Pisano built a wooden Christ on the cross, more or less ten years before the Giotto's cross in Santa Maria Novella, in which Christ was represented like a real human that was crucified. A further connection between the wooden production of Giovanni Pisano and Giotto's cross is that while Pisano's wooden cross, made between 1270 and 1280, was under restoration, the restorers found in the "cartiglio" *scroll paper* inscriptions in Latin, Greek and Hebrew. This was an original idea for the Medieval period that Giotto reused and applied for the first time in his Florentine cross.⁵⁵

While the role of Giovanni Pisano in the development of medieval art and the self awareness of being an artist is well known, this does not match with the general understanding and appreciation of wooden sculpture production of the Middle Ages. This link with Giotto and the inscription that Giovanni Pisano left in the Pulpit of the Duomo in Pisa, in which he praises himself as sublime author in stone, wood, and gold, shows the importance and the prestige of wooden sculpture production. At the same time, however, it cannot be said about the consideration of the artistic production in wood of the same period. In addition, these medieval sculptures were

⁵⁴ Ibidem., 24

⁵⁵ Max Seidel, *Il Crocifisso*, 75.

often destroyed due to the fact that this genre was not really appreciated during the Renaissance, Baroque, and Neoclassical periods and as was often not protected or even kept.⁵⁶

However, Max Seidel's considers the link between the Santa Maria Novella Cross by Giotto and the production of Giovanni Pisano as a way to show Giotto's interest in obtaining a realistic human dimension of the representation of Christ. This raises questions about the effective role of sculpture in affecting the iconography of Christ and, in general, the importance and function of this medium in shaping devotion during the Middle Ages. This is relevant for studying the importance of the shift from the Triumphant Christ to the Suffering Christ, the relationship of the Byzantine art production in the diffusion of this iconography in Western art, and, above all, for understanding the reception of the artistic culture and achievement of Middle Ages through painting.

The role of the Franciscans was crucial in supporting this new idea of the humanity of Christ and a compassionate relationship with him and his suffering. At the same time, the fact that Giotto elaborated this new concept in painting within the Dominican environment shows not only the reciprocal influences in elaborating an aesthetic that relates to the *body* of Christ and his human side through art production among both Franciscans and Dominicans, but also a conscious, despite

⁵⁶ Ibidem., 75.

apparently indirect, reference to the sculptural medium as a way to show the presence of Christ.

The direct example of this process was Giotto's decision to make the figure of Christ more human in the version of the *Christus Patiens* and his changing the path of Western art with his work in Padua and Florence. Without any doubt, the role of Franciscans were important within this context of art production in promoting this new iconography of Christ within a new devotional context after the example of the life of Saint Francis and the reception of the stigmata. The core of their devotion was a more direct and compassionate participation of the suffering of Christ. Since 1230, when Giunta Pisano painted for the Franciscan order his first interpretation of the suffering Christ, this painted cross offered the viewer a model for contemplation, and it reflected and channeled a new devotional relationship with the crucifixion and the body of Christ.

It is interesting to notice how in both Franciscan and Dominican art the material image through which Christ reveals himself and through which he is represented is a painting. As with Franciscans, Dominicans seemed to rely on the painted image of the crucifixion and how the devotional relationship with Christ affected the iconography toward a more sculptural dimension.

Giotto has been officially considered by scholars as the most influential and innovative artist in the Late Medieval period; he was even considered the originator

of the Renaissance in his capability of pioneering a new figurative realism that was fully developed later during the Renaissance. However, just as Max Seidel considers it important to study the influential role of Giovanni Pisano's sculpture in rendering Giotto's realism in his Crucifix, I believed that the role of the sculpture, especially wooden sculpture and its presence and role in Medieval art and devotion, needs to be explored more in relation to Giotto's artistic production.

Another factor that can support the research in this direction is the fact that—and this is often underestimated—the painted crosses followed the visual function of sculpture in their iconographical development. In fact, along with the Crucifixion of Christ, early painted crosses usually include some scenes from the Passion and the full-length figures of the Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist (**Fig 34**). This eventually changes to a more icon-like presence of the Virgin Mary and John right on the side of the cross, beside the outstretched arms of Christ (**Fig 35**), focusing on the figure of Christ and his body. The completion of the iconographical changes and development of painted crosses between XII and XIV century in Italy ends with achieving the same compositional structure and essence of the wooden sculpted Crosses especially if we consider the passage from the group of the Descent to the animated sculpture of the crucified Christ, in which there is the only presence and depiction of the figure of Christ, excluding all the figures, even the icon-like

image of the Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist.⁵⁷ Paradoxically, the cross by Giotto in Santa Maria Novella that asserts a crucial moment for the development of the representation of Christ and the development of the pictorial production in general, occurs when the painted cross corresponds the most with the sculpted version. In this, Giovanni Pisano is clearly his source of inspiration and serves as an excellent example. This implies that sculpture had an essential role in shaping the development of painted crosses that had their acme with Giotto's crosses, and most likely sculptures achieved that naturalism even earlier than Giotto's work.

In fact, the paradox is that as painted crosses reached the apogee of naturalism with Giotto, thereby breaking with the Byzantine cultural tradition, this is when they corresponded the most with the compositional structure of sculpted crosses. In addition, once Giotto painted his cross and this new naturalism in representing Christ was achieved in painting, painted crosses ceased to be produced. In fact, once painted crosses started to embody and promote a more naturalistic representation of the body, humanity, and suffering of Christ, their production stopped and they were substituted more widely with a life-size wooden crucified Christ. Even if wooden sculptures already existed before the production, use, and diffusion of painted cross,⁵⁸ this shows a pivotal shift from painting to

⁵⁷ Sandberg Vavalà, *La Croce Dipinta Italiana*, 74

⁵⁸ *Ibidem.*, 74.

sculpture in a crucial moment for the devotion in the late Medieval period. Since the beginning, when the focus of devotion became the body of Christ and its rendering as human as possible in order to move the beholder into a more compassionate participation of the suffering of the Passion, wooden sculptures had a special role even if just at the end of the fourteenth century they became the fundamental and privileged medium to represent and live the experience of the crucified body of Christ. This raises questions about how to explore what was the real role of wooden sculpture and painting in determining devotion during the Late Medieval period in Italy in a more accurate way.

A case clearly demonstrating this sort of devotional change and trajectory toward a definitive volumetric representation of Christ is the wooden crucifix with movable arms by Donatello in the Franciscan Church of Santa Croce in Florence (**Fig 36**). This, I believe, is an interesting example of the devotional intentions of Franciscans and what most clearly embodies their relationship with the body of Christ and affective devotion. This is the result of their intentions that they were able to materialize only later in the development of the order, but that was always a part of their belief in living the Passion and the relationship with Christ, through the example of Saint Francis. There are other examples that would confirm this, such as the fifteenth century Christ with movable arms in the Lower Basilica in Saint Francis

in Assisi (**Fig 37**), the church of Saint Francis in Siena (**Fig 38**), and the church of Saint Francis in Gubbio (**Fig 39**).

The existence of these movable wooden sculptures of Christ in Franciscan churches clearly shows that the intention of Franciscans was not only to relate symbolically to the human and suffering side of Christ, but also that they wanted something that could channel their devotional intention, a tangible presence able to embody their devotional needs and their relationship with Christ. Painted crosses were only their first step in developing their spirituality and their relationship with Christ. They adapted themselves, along with Dominicans, to the use of images according to the official policy of the Church. However, the way in which the use of these liturgical objects such as panel paintings and wooden sculptures developed shows how Christianity and liturgy found sculpture to be the most efficient medium to embody the Christian message through the life of Christ. The Sacri Monti di Varallo is the final example of this ideal journey in which Franciscans showed their way of living the faith and the role of sculpture in representing their spirituality.

As the Church recognized the value of art as a missionary instrument, pictorial narrative became an important component of public art⁵⁹, and images

⁵⁹ Herbert L Kessler, "On the State of Medieval Art History". *The Art Bulletin*. No 2, 70 (1988), 184.

facilitated the conversion from pagan practices that relied on cult statues.⁶⁰ Pictorial production, since the diffusion of the illuminated manuscripts, obtained a special authority especially for its integration and use with the written text.⁶¹ The Church supported this special position of images, and the understanding of the Late Medieval period has been often seen through the lens of pictorial production. At the same time, sculptures always played an important role, despite being apparently “unofficial” in comparison to the official position of the Church and directions of the period and the liturgical use of artworks. Both panel paintings and frescos had a very important role in the diffusion of the Christian message and evangelization that the Church, since official entities relied heavily on them. At the same time, sculpture had the unique role of materializing the Christian message and providing the chance for the faithful to actively participate along with the presence of the “real body of Christ”. Sculpture, and in this case specifically wooden sculpture, was the medium that expressed the idea of the presence of Christ and his humanity in the best possible way. This was shown through the presence and diffusion of sculptures within the Mendicant Orders as well, especially Franciscans and Dominicans. Moreover, even the adaptation in painted images of the cross or icons of Christ toward a tridimensional portrayal of miracles, especially in particular moments

⁶⁰ *Ibidem.*, 185.

⁶¹ *Ibidem.*, 185.

such as talking images in which Christ in his humanity reveals his otherworldly essence, painters looked at sculpture to represent his physicality and presence. This, I believe, was not only an artistic choice, but the result of the religious customs and mindset of the period. Wooden sculpture was the best medium through which to embody the devotional experience of the Late Medieval period in Italy; along with the role of Franciscans and Dominicans, the pictorial production can support this as well.

Chapter 6

Polychrome Wooden Crucifixes in History and Historiography

An anecdote relayed by Giorgio Vasari in *Le Vite* about the conception of Filippo Brunelleschi and Donatello's Florentine *Crucifixes* (**figs. 1-2**) helped establish a narrative about the role and reception of wooden polychrome sculpture that has informed the subsequent discourse of art history. Upon seeing Donatello's *Santa Croce Crucifix*, Brunelleschi describes the appearance of Christ as a ploughman on the cross¹ rather than "most delicate and in all its parts the most perfect human form that was ever born."² Challenged by Donatello, who says: "if it were as easy to make this figure as to judge it, my Christ would appear to thee to be Christ and not a ploughman; take wood, therefore, and try to make one thyself,"³ Brunelleschi responds, according to the author, with his own polychrome wooden *Crucifix*. "Donato, therefore, entering the house and going into the hall, saw the Crucifix of Filippo, placed in a good light; and stopping short to study it, he found it so perfectly finished."⁴ The extraordinary and "perfectly finished" sculpture carved by Brunelleschi becomes, for the sake of the ideals of the Cinquecento history of sculpture, an aesthetically more successful and rational work in comparison to Donatello's un-ideal and realistic Christ.

¹ Vasari, *Lives*, 241.

² *Ibid.*, 241.

³ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 241.

A key theme of this dissertation asserts that the important role played by polychrome wooden sculpture has been overlooked in the dominant art historical narrative, and the Vasarian notion of renaissance progress generally leaves little room for the contributions and importance of the medieval object in central Italy. Vasari's tale has generally informed subsequent reception that favored the harmony of Brunelleschi over the realism of Donatello in Renaissance historiography. What is generally overlooked, however, is the fact that these two prominent fifteenth-century works—widely acknowledged for their aesthetic importance—⁵ are not entirely innovative products of a seminal moment of Renaissance rivalry and flowering creativity. While scholarship has often noted that—as an early work by Donatello—the Santa Croce *Crucifix* has residual medieval tendencies, it tends to play the foil in a model of stylistic progress as an impetus for the creation of the more harmonious *Crucifix* by Brunelleschi.⁶

Overlooked, however, is the fact that these two sculptures are notable examples of a typology that developed within the context of central Italian medieval art, and that, while increasingly exhibiting some characteristics of Florentine Quattrocento stylistic change, their functional roles are strongly rooted in local

⁵ See, for example, Francesca Petrucci ("Opere in terracotta, legno, pietra" in *Donatello: Tecniche e Linguaggio*, 2003: 91-126, esp. 91), in which Donatello's mastery of wooden sculpture is part of the new, humanistic theme of the renaissance mastery of many media (in particular, she stresses Donatello's use of terracotta as a revival of a classical medium).

⁶ See, for example, H. W. Janson's *The Sculpture of Donatello* take on the story of both Crucifixes by Donatello and Brunelleschi and the historical context, (p. 7-12) Also, Poesche (*Donatello and his World*, p. 18; 376-77)

popular piety.⁷ They continue the theme of the particular variation of the Suffering Christ that emerged in central Italy in the late Middle Ages from sculpted Descent from the Cross groups, and were made for Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella, the primary mendicant churches in Florence for the Franciscans and Dominicans respectively. As tridimensional polychrome works with characteristic naturalistic features, their development and function is part of a larger history of Medieval Christian in-the-round sculpture. As such, an ever-present question of idolatry is present, an issue that is addressed in this chapter by considering the historical context of their manufacture and use. Ultimately, I contend that due to the particular way in which this particular group of polychrome sculptures developed in central Italy—first the *Descent from the Cross* groups and then the singular *Crucifix*—their specific situation and use generally protected them from accusations of idolatry. However, the issue was consistently a matter of concern and only ongoing traditions and pragmatic approaches to their use, as we will see, mediated potential problems.

The wooden *Descent from the Cross* groups that emerged in the thirteenth century and the animated sculptures of the crucified Christ that come to prominence in the fourteenth century anticipate the examples of Donatello and Brunelleschi that initiated this chapter. In fact, Donatello's sculpture, with its own movable arms and natural appearance, is a prime example of an existing category of works that valued

⁷ Joachim Poesche (*Donatello and his World: Sculpture of the Italian Renaissance*, 1993) does acknowledge that Donatello's movable arms "are hinged and could be lowered to the sides of the body in accordance with the requirements of the Good Friday liturgy." (p. 377)

polychromatic vivacity and life-like realism, while Brunelleschi's polychromy and addition of a loincloth equally conforms to the category under consideration. Like their predecessors, both of the sculptures were sacred objects directly associated with both the human and divine presence of Christ. Though made of wood, the size, likeness, and ways in which the *Descent* groups and suffering Christ sculptures were used rendered them as vehicles of divine intercession, the most efficacious and direct embodiments of the divine and human natures of Christ. Despite the capability of these objects to reveal the divine and provide direct access to the sacred, scholarship has historically tended to consider earlier examples only as devotional objects, without recognizing the continuity of the well-known Quattrocento examples within their historical context. In fact, from Vasari until recent years we encounter negative opinions about the medieval wooden sculptures, a characteristic apparent in Vasari's consideration of Donatello's sculpture—a work that is more fully in line with the realism of earlier examples. This critical tendency has affected not only the understanding and importance of these objects, but also their role in affecting the devotional life and art production since the late Middle Ages.

Conservation and Critical Reception

Wooden sculpture poses a challenging paradox: while many of the limits, problems, and prejudices related to the understanding and use of wooden

sculptures have been outlined in the preceding chapters, it is rare to find acknowledgments that assert their qualities as objects of study in the current literature. Damage over time, repainting, and re-appropriation of wooden sculpture has influenced the critical response to their importance. Recently, scholars have begun to reevaluate this artistic production and to consider different aspects of sculpture that were previously neglected. However, more work is needed to change, or start to change, the way we view the dialogical relationship between sculptures and painting. Without a doubt, the study of wooden sculpture entails different challenges. Few primary historical documents can fully and critically help this study, and these often describe pastoral visits in which the bishop in charge of the visit deems sculptures inappropriate or old and orders their destruction or substitution. Another challenge is that these sculptures are scattered in a vast territory and in very small towns. Currently there are still several of these simulacra, especially those of the animated sculpture of the crucified Christ, that are known locally but remain totally unknown to scholarship or to the wider public.

Additionally, there is a notable disparity between the few examples that have been embraced by the discourse of art history for their aesthetic importance—such as the aforementioned works by Donatello and Brunelleschi—and the many sculptures that are relegated to provincial collections and the history of devotion. For example, when many of these sculptures are displayed in museums, the way in which they are labeled does not contribute to an appropriate comprehension of

their important functions. One often finds “*Crucifix*” as a title, in addition to vague information such as century, period style, or artistic school **(Fig 3)**. In effect, these labels contribute to the intellectual isolation of the sculptures instead of a clarification of their important place in the historical dialogue. Furthermore, heavy use over time of these sculptures has made recognition of their original structure difficult. Besides being used in processions and other events, they were functional devotional objects to which votive images were frequently attached by devotees. As a result of centuries of use and damage, many have been modified with new colors or adapted structurally. As a result, they can appear quite different from their original states. Consequently, the works are overlooked as no longer being original documents or true to their respective periods stylistically.

However, when these wooden sculptures are considered in studies, they are generally utilized for the benefit of understanding medieval religious rituals, literature, theater, or the use of relics. They are viewed as a passive element, a surrogate for something else, rather than as an active vehicle and mediator capable of embodying and representing the sacred. Additionally, because their use was different than that of icons, paintings, or other kind of sculptures, and due to the wide range of the quality of these artifacts, they are more often associated with the realm of devotional objects than with art production. This obviously limits the full consideration of these sculptures and does not allow a proper dialogue with the other religious and devotional art forms. In order to rehabilitate wooden sculpture’s

proper place within the academic debate that has flourished for media such as painting, or periods such as the Renaissance—including highlighting issues of continuity with the late Middle Ages—it is helpful to examine the way that scholarship in different fields and periods has discussed topics involving wooden sculptures, as well as how these scholarly debates resonate once applied to the medieval wooden sculptures that are the objects of this study.

The Devotional Use of Wooden Sculptures and Questions of Idolatry

The central Italian sculpture groups being examined here, because of potential accusations of idolatry in the ways they were manufactured and used, should be considered within the general context of the production and function of images in the Christian religion. The second commandment states, "Thou shalt not make to thyself a graven thing nor the likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, nor of those things that are in the waters under the earth" (Exodus 20:4), which obviously refers to the prohibition of making images. Further, admonition about the making of images comes from Deuteronomy, particularly: "Cursed be the man that maketh a graven and molten thing the abomination of the Lord, the work of the hands of artificers" (Deuteronomy 27:15). The attention in both cases is directed more to the maker than the object itself. Likewise, one early apologist, Tertullian, argued against the pagan cult of images in his treatise *On*

Idolatry: “Every offence committed by idolatry must of necessity be imputed to every maker of every idol.”⁸

Images and image production have been an issue since the beginning of Christianity. The problem first reached its peak in the East with the long debate between the iconoclasts, who rejected the sanctity of icons and rejected their adorations, and the iconodules, who defended icon creation and icon veneration. The controversy was based on the theoretical implications of representing Christ: an icon of Christ would have either depicted his humanity alone or both his human and divine essence, and in the latter case his human form would have been separated from the divine nature, or it would have confused the two.⁹ The solution at first was that the Eucharist alone was the only true representation of Christ and, as a consequence, all manufactured icons of Christ were forbidden. This approach respected the second commandment.¹⁰ This official stance on image use and production was justified by the fact that it would have eliminated idolatry, which was caused by the objects themselves. The response to this viewpoint came in the Second Council of Nicaea in 787, which decreed that it was possible to represent Christ because of his incarnation. Consequently, the reverence and adoration given to icons was acceptable and was not deemed idolatry because the real and true worship was given to God and only Him. In relation to the veneration of Saints, the

⁸ Tertullian, *De Idolatria*, cap 18, pl. I, Col. 738 in Davis-Weyer, Caecilia. *Early Medieval Art, 300-1150; sources and documents* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 3-6.

⁹ Robin Cormack, *Byzantine Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 87.

¹⁰ *Ibidem.*, 87.

belief was that the portraits of saints had the same roles as the relics, providing the sense of a real presence.¹¹

The use of images in the West

In the West, the diatribe on the use of images was never as strong as in the Byzantine East (at least until the Reformation and Counterreformation), and the problem was mainly focused on trying to justify the use of images or include them in a context that was approved by the ecclesiastical authority, especially in the matter of relics and their adoration and display. The production of sculptures in the West was vastly different than in the East. In fact, in the Byzantine east, despite the decision that was made in favor of the images and because of the serious opposition between iconoclasts and iconodules, the production and use of images were allowed only for “standardized images, with a precise function, a familiar appearance, and a firm theological definition.”¹² The West did not have similar kinds of problems. While in the East the problems focused only on the *icons*, in the West the dispute was stimulated by the presence, use, and especially the display of reliquaries and sculptures.

¹¹ Leslie Brubaker, *Inventing Byzantine Iconoclasm* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2012), 115.

¹² Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: a History of the Image Before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 298.

The preservation of relics inside the sculptures functioned as validation for these objects, and this seemed to be a key element for Western Christianity. During his reign, Charlemagne assigned a theological report, the *Libri Carolini*, debating the Byzantine position toward the use of images. The *Libri Carolini* had a limited impact also because the pope himself did not want to take part in the discussion against the Greek theology.¹³ At the same time, the *Libri Carolini* show the position of previous popes regarding images, which guaranteed a large freedom in matter of images for the Franks. Images continued to be allowed, but at the same time veneration of these images was prohibited.¹⁴ When the sculpture or the reliquary sculpture became objects of veneration, the Church worked very carefully to build a sort of frame to justify and insert the veneration of images in the orthodox belief and practice and theologians worked in order to endorse this devotional practice.¹⁵

This process was the consequence that followed the destruction of the pagan idols, which in turn were replaced with the relics of the saints.¹⁶ Considering the delicacy of this issue, it is implied that the Church oversaw through time the production of images and their use within the liturgy or the devotional context. Another aspect that is important in relation to this context is the sculptures' mobility. These sculptures were carried in processions both inside the Church and

¹³ Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 298.

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*, 298.

¹⁵ Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 1.

¹⁶ Elsmarie Knögel-Anrich, *Schriftquellen zur Kunstgeschichte der Merowingerzeit*. (Hildesheim: G. Olms: 1992), no 979. As cited in Ilene H Forsyth, *The Throne of Wisdom; Wood Sculptures of the Madonna in Romanesque France* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972), 81.

outside through the streets of the cities. This practice started during the early Medieval period, and there are documents attesting that the reliquary statue of Sainte Foy was carried in procession with the accompaniment of instruments¹⁷ This relationship with sculpture appeared to remain fairly standard through the centuries and seemed to exist within the boundaries allowed and supervised by the ecclesiastical authority. Despite the fact that concerns about the use of images and the risk of idolatry were always present, this did not prevent the developments of cults around these objects.

The Reliquary of Sainte Foy

Since the early Middle Ages, if relics were not used, holy substances such as the host were often inserted into the sculptures.¹⁸ Consequently, it was probably the function of sculpture as reliquaries that encouraged the revival of sculpture in the West that had been dormant since antiquity.¹⁹ According to Keller, large scale sculpture is legitimized by the insertion and use of relics.²⁰ Keller affirms that the early fully plastic sculptures held a host or relic so that the holiness contained in the

¹⁷ Bernardus and A. Bouillette, *Liber Miracolorum Sancte Fidis* (Paris, A. Picard: 1897), II, IV, p. 100. As cited in Forsyth, *The Throne of Wisdom*, 40.

¹⁸ Annika Elisabeth Fisher, "Cross Altar and Crucifix in Ottonian Cologne. Past Narrative, Present Ritual, Future Resurrection", in *Decorating the Lord's Table: on the Dynamics Between Image and Altar in the Middle Ages*, eds Søren Kaspersen, and Erik Thunø (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen: 2006), 48.

¹⁹ Harald Keller, "Zur Entstehung der sakralen Vollskulptur in der Ottonischen Zeit" in *Festschrift für Hans Jantzen*. Berlin: Gebr. Mann, (1951), 71-91.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 71.

host and the relic would be transferred to the object and this was a solution that avoided the issue of idolatry.²¹ The sculpture not only allowed a physical form but also functioned as a container for the relics, which helped justify its presence and repel any doubts of the sculpture being an idol.²²

One of the earliest and best-known examples of a Medieval Christian church authority shifting from a skeptical position about the veneration of a reliquary statue to the acknowledgment and the approval of the cult involves is the reliquary statue of Sainte Foy of Conques (**Fig 4**).²³ In fact, Bernard of Angers provided his own eyewitness account of the cult of Sainte Foy after he became aware that Sainte Foy earned a reputation as miracle worker.²⁴ Once he arrived at Conques, Bernard was disappointed and irritated to see what was happening around the sculpture. He considered it an idol and believers as the “deluded rustic”.²⁵ Soon he came to believe that the reliquary sculpture of Sainte Foy was not an idol but instead a means to access the saint in Her glory in heaven while having Her remains on earth.²⁶

Through the account of Bernard, the Church was able to accept and validate the cult,

²¹ Ibid., 71. Cited also in: Anna Pawlik, *Das Bildwerk als Reliquiar?: Funktionen früher Grossplastik im 9. bis 11. Jahrhundert* (Petersberg: Imhof, 2013), 11.

²² Ellert Dahl, *Heavenly Images*: 175-192.

²³ For a full understanding of the issues related to the reliquary sculpture of Saint Foy see Beate Fricke and Andrew Griebeler, *Fallen Idols, Risen Saints: Sainte Foy of Conques and the Revival of Monumental Sculpture in Medieval Art*, *Studies in the Visual Cultures of the Middle Ages* ; v. 7, Turnhout, Belgium: Grafikon. Also: Ellert Dahl, "Heavenly images: the statue of St. Foy of Conques and the signification of the Medieval 'Cult-Image' in the West" in *Acta Ad Archaeologiam Et Artium Historiam Pertinentia. Series in 4 / Institutum Romanum Norvegiae, Universitas Osloensis. Ed. Hans Peter L'Orange [U.a.]. Series in 4* (1978), 175-192.

²⁴ Dahl, *Heavenly Images*, 175-192.

²⁵ Ibidem., 177.

²⁶ Ibidem., 178.

acknowledging that the reliquary sculpture provided only a transposed likeness, a heavenly image of the saint. The function of the reliquary statue should be considered within the context of its relationship with the believer, in which the believer activates the statue.²⁷ This dynamic, which was approved and somehow supervised by the Church, is a sort of a paradigm of how the ecclesiastical institution related to the veneration of images, especially reliquaries, because of their physical and tridimensional essence. Theologians often struggled with the popularity of images and when they were not able to ban them or control them over the resistance of devotees they ended up by regulating access and explaining the devotional roles of the images.²⁸ What happened at Conques for the cult of Sainte Foy is interesting because it offers a genuine and accurate account of the attitude of the Church and the acceptance of the cult from the Bernard of Angers. Acceptance of the cult from such a high-ranking representative of the Church as Bernard of Angers implies that devotion toward Sainte Foy and her reliquary was not ultimately considered idolatrous, and also that the cult itself did not go against the doctrine of the Church. Once the Church accepted a cult, it would have initiated a communal language between member of the community that overlooked the social differences, and the Church created a shared language that has the sacred image as its focal

²⁷ *Ibidem.*, 189-190.

²⁸ Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 1.

point.²⁹ Bernard d'Angers, in accepting the cult of the statue of Sainte Foy, seems to accept the cultural and devotional dimension that was developing around the reliquary statue, exorcising the fear and risk of idolatry.³⁰

The Gero Cross and Medieval Devotion of the Wooden Crucifix

While Sainte Foy offers one useful case, the *Gero Cross* (**Fig 5**), dated around 960-65, is a prominent example of an early life-sized wooden *Crucifix* sculpture that holds a relic inside. As one of the prototypes of the typology of the Suffering Christ,³¹ the *Gero Cross* is among the first examples of a renewed line of development for monumental sculpture in medieval art.³² Scholarship concentrates on issues related to the dating of the sculpture and the possible linkages to Thietmar's *Chronicon*.³³ According to that source, "after [Archbishop Gero of Cologne] commissioned the wooden cross, one day he noticed a split in the back of the head of the figure. He laid

²⁹ Vittorio Lanternari, *Festa Carisma Apocalisse*, (Sellerio Editore, Palermo: 1989), 104 -105. Clara Gallini, *Forme di Trasmissione Orale e Scritta nella Religione Popolare*, in "Ricerche di Storia Sociale e Religiosa" XI, (1977), 100-101.

³⁰ Jean Claude Schmitt, "Les Idoles Chrétiennes", in *L'idolâtrie. Rencontres de l'Ecole du Louvre*, Paris, La Documentation Française (1990), 113.

³¹ Jacopo Lorenzelli, *Custode dell'Immagine: Scultura Ligneae Europea XII-XV secolo* (Bergamo: Galleria Lorenzelli, 1987), 80.

³² Schiller *Iconography*, 141.

³³ The *Chronicon of Thietmar of Maresburg* is quoted in Annika Elisabeth Fisher, "Cross Altar and Crucifix in Ottonian Cologne," 47.

a host and a particle of the Cross in the crack and prayed that it would close again, which it soon did.”³⁴

In the early Middle Ages, the host was considered a relic of Christ, and it was frequently inserted within three-dimensional sculptures.³⁵ It has been argued that earlier medieval sculptures representing Christ had a receptacle inside of them in which there was space for the Eucharist, allowing the sculpture to represent the physical body of Christ in his moment of death. This is, in fact, the case for the *Gero Cross* and for examples from both the Carolingian and Ottonian periods,³⁶ and the practice continued throughout Europe until the thirteenth century. In many cases, it was probably more common to insert a relic, typically believed to be a piece from the True Cross, inside the sculpture.³⁷ Anna Pawlik, in turn, questions— considering the absence of written or visual sources—whether the early large-plastic sculptures such as the *Gero Cross* are actually legitimized by the contents of relics.³⁸ Regardless,

³⁴ David Warner, *Ottonian Germany: The Chronicon of Thietmar of Merseburg* (Manchester and New York, 2001), 128. As quoted in Annika Elisabeth Fisher, “Cross Altar and Crucifix in Ottonian Cologne,” 46. See also: Schiller *Iconography*, 141.

³⁵ The presence of a reliquary compartment as a common feature was refuted by Gertrud Schiller and by Ilene H. Forsyth, in which examples dating to the same period of the *Gero Cross* were found without having a spaces for relics (Ilene Forsyth, *The Throne of Wisdom: Wooden Sculptures of the Madonna in Romanesque France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 74, as quoted in Schiller *Iconography*, 141. In her footnote (104) she mentions that a third of the sculptures dating from the eleventh century contained compartments for sculptures. Anna Pawlik has more recently stressed, however, that the presence of relics within sculptures of both the crucified Christ and the Virgin Mary enthroned with Child was, in fact, more common: Anna Pawlik, *Das Bildwerk als Reliquiar?: Funktionen früher Grossplastik im 9. bis 11. Jahrhundert* (Petersberg: Imhof, 2013).

³⁶ *Ibidem.*, 49. For other examples, see Ilene Forsyth, *The Throne of Wisdom*, 78.

³⁷ Fisher Annika Elisabeth, 49,59. She mentions in her note (21) that the Ringelheim Cross had a small bag with stones from the Holy Sepulcher in its head while the Anno Cross in the Grafshcaft Monastery had a receptacle holding a piece from the column to which Christ was bound during the Flagellation.

³⁸ Pawlik, 23.

despite evidence that relics were likely housed inside many of the earlier medieval sculptures, when devotion was directed to sculptures of the crucified Christ, the Church was most concerned that the medieval faithful adored Christ on the Cross instead of the relic of the cross.³⁹ A passage from the Acts of Paris Synod of 825 clarifies this position: “But when you see Christians worshipping the cross, know that they worship the crucified Christ and not the wood. [...] Therefore, we do not say to the cross or the representations of saints, ‘You are our gods’, for they are not our gods, but they are rather likeness and images of Christ, and of his saints, and it is for *memoria* and honor, and for the decoration of the churches of those prostrating and worshipping.”⁴⁰

According to contemporary theories of the period, there was a reciprocal relationship between the wooden sculpture and the Eucharist itself as a relic. Accordingly, the monumental crucifixes became the most direct visible access to the idea of the Eucharist.⁴¹ Paschasius’ theory of the Eucharist as the real presence of

³⁹ Beate Fricke, *Fallen Idols, Risen Saints*, 99.

⁴⁰ Libellus Synodalis Parisiensis: *Concilium Parisiense* A. 825, XV Patrologia Latina 98, col. 1392C: ‘Quando enim vides Christianos adorantes crucem, cognosce, quoniam crucifixo Christo adorationem proferunt et non lingo. [...] Ergo non sic dicimus cruci, neque figuris sanctorum, dii nostril estis, non enim sunt dii nostril, sed similitudines et imagines Christi, et sanctorum ejus, et ad memoriam et honorem, et decorum ecclesiarum adjacentium et adorantium.’ As quoted in Beate Fricke, *Fallen Idols, Risen Saints*, 99. See also for the Latin text note 350 Chapter II “Image Veneration and *Cultura Veterum Deorum* in the West” pag 141.

⁴¹ Kirsten Van Ausdall, “Art and Eucharist in the Late Middle Ages,” in *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Middle Ages* edited by Ian Christopher Levy, Gary Macy, and Kristen Van Ausdall (Leiden; Boston : Brill, 2012), 547. Also Caroline Walker Bynum in: *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007) states that “the faithful were urged to encounter with eyes where encounter with lips was dangerous and rare, to ‘eat’ by ‘seeing’”. According to Bynum: “Theologians stressed that the highest form of encounter was without images, that devotional objects and church furnishing were only simulacra”

Christ shows the effort to work out the relation between the bread and wine and the real body and blood of Christ: “He [Christ] left us this sacrament – a visible figure and image of his flesh and blood – so that our mind and our flesh could be more richly nourished through them, and so that we could grasp things invisible and spiritual through faith. What is externally perceived in this sacrament is an image or sign; but what is received internally is truth....”⁴²

These theories helped shape the religious and devotional understanding of the *Gero Cross* and similar works. The connection between the host and the wooden sculpture contributed to the ability to see and experience the object as a representation of the physical presence of the body of Christ hung on the cross. In her article “Cross Altar and Crucifix in Ottonian Cologne,” Annika Elisabeth Fisher observes that the Eucharist’s insertion into sculpture “alters its status as a sacrament since its external appearance is not longer different from its internal truth. Looking at the cross the spectator [...] gazes upon that which the host truly is: the incarnate, historical body of Christ, hanging painfully on the cross. The gap between the visible *figura* and the invisible *veritas* seems to have disappeared, since

(p. 87). At the same time there was a growth and diffusion of visual images that, as I demonstrate in this study, will gain a prominent role and symbolic meaning within the devotional context of the late Medieval period. In fact, while they were officially meant to simplify and make accessible theological ideas for lay worship, in reality they became the true representation of the body and presence of Christ.

⁴² Radbertus, Paschasius, *De Corpore*, IV (CCCM, 28-30), in Nathan Mitchel, *Cult and Controversy: The Worship of the Eucharist Outside the Mass* (New York, Pueblo Publish Company, 1982), 77. As quoted also in Fisher Annika Elisabeth, *Cross altar and crucifix*, 50, see note 37.

now the Host's identity as the incarnate body of Christ is revealed."⁴³ In the case of the *Gero Cross* the Host inside guaranteed the presence of Christ, but even without the Host, sculptures had the capability to embody the humanity of Christ, as a physical body and as human presence. The awareness of the presence of the Host inside intensified the importance of the sculpture. These sculptures became not just a symbolic or figurative rendering of the body of Christ, but embodied an intentional likeness that, especially in the case of the *Gero Cross*, acted as effective objects of devotion. The fact that the Host was inside the sculpture, allowing it to function as a reliquary, facilitated and justified it without an association as an idol.⁴⁴ In fact, the Church came to acknowledge the authority of these objects in effectively representing the human side and bodily presence of Christ.

Visualizing Christ

While the worry of idolatry was a real concern for the production and use of sculptures in the early and late Middle Ages, there was an effectiveness and functionality in presenting Christ's body using the sculptural medium. The presence of the host in the *Gero Cross* made the invisible essence of the body of Christ visible, and the sculpture began to perform a different role in the devotional context. From a theological perspective, sculpture is justified by the fact that is able to embody

⁴³ *Ibidem.*, 52.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem.*, 48, 52.

aspects of the Christian confession inasmuch as they develop the physical and material manifestation of a key element of the Christian religion⁴⁵ such as the incarnation of Christ and the appearance and presence of the human aspect of Christ. This is especially true in the figure of the crucified Christ, which is a simulacrum of bodily presence and his humanity.

Wooden sculpture was able to reach a special symbolic and devotional role for cultural reasons because of its ability to reflect and literally embody “the desire to make vividly real the idea of Christ crucified, or a local saint or the enthroned Madonna and Child [which] led men of the Early Middle Ages to visualize and represent these sacred figures in full three-dimensional form, and even more to attain a transcendent experience of them.”⁴⁶ “By the power of the sculpture in the round, the images made the presence of their prototype vicariously manifest in the observer’s reality and the acceptance of their role as intermediaries between the observer’s world and the divine realm beyond was a necessary precondition to the original conception and subsequent development of them.”⁴⁷ The production of wooden sculptures of the crucified Christ not only anticipated the change and use in the West of the iconography of the Suffering Christ, but they also carried “since the beginning of the revival of free standing sculpture that dated in the eighth

⁴⁵ Reinhard Hoeps. *Aus dem Schatten des Goldenen Kalbes. Skulptur in Theologischer Perspektive* (Paderborn 1999), 84-90.

⁴⁶ Fisher Annika Elisabeth, *Cross Altar and Crucifix* 91.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem.*, 91.

century”⁴⁸ the idea of presence and physicality that echoed both the religious needs of the period and the potential of wooden sculpture in representing the earthly body of Christ. In turn, medieval devotion was affected through the liturgical ductility of these sculptures. In addition to their intrinsic potential as art objects, they ultimately satisfied the most visceral needs of devotion.

The faithful viewed the *Gero Cross* as a reliquary, and the wood representing Christ was “only a didactic shell that provides the truth about the relics it encloses.”⁴⁹ The wooden bodily representation’s relationship to the host it houses becomes the transposition of the incarnation of Christ: “the real human body of Christ played during his earthly life, a cover for his divinity and it allowed Christ to walk among men.”⁵⁰ Ecclesiastical writers, such as the archbishop Rather of Verona, supported this connection by stressing the idea of the Eucharist as real presence.⁵¹ This is the theoretical starting point of the official understanding and use of these wooden sculptures. At the same time by focusing on the object, sculpture itself possesses its own agency in a strict relationship with the liturgy and the Christian message beyond the official attempt to justify its presence and link with the host. This implies the metaphorical and real representation of the incarnation of Christ.

⁴⁸ Ibidem., 91.

⁴⁹ Ibidem., 53.

⁵⁰ Ibidem., 53.

⁵¹ “Let us therefore not be deceived or deceive ourselves: God it is who received ...but just as then He was hidden in the flesh, so now in very reality He is hidden in the bread turned into flesh” in Rather of Verona and Peter L. D. Reid *The Complete Works of Rather of Verona* (Binghamnton, N.Y.: Medieval and Renaissance Text Studies, 1991), 222-265. As quoted in Fisher Annika Elisabeth, *Cross Altar and Crucifix*, 53.

Ultimately, the ways in which these sculptures changed throughout the Middle Ages reflect the devotional needs of the devotees as well as the capability of these objects to adapt to those needs.

The importance of this sculpture is not only the medium, but the subject as well; that is, it is innovative in the way it represents the suffering of Christ and his physical nature. Like the wooden groups of the *Descent from the Cross*, which were likely an Italian invention, the general iconography of the Suffering Christ seems to have developed in sculpture before appearing in painting in Western Europe. Late medieval sculpture also witnessed the alternative iconography of Christ triumphant, in which Christ, alive, is represented overcoming death while on the cross **(Fig 6)**. However, it is the suffering Christ type that is the focus here. The *Gero Cross* represents the importance of this iconography as a sculptural example. It shows the humanity of Christ, as a suffering man and not as a God able to overcome death without suffering. The position of the body, as well as its life-size proportions, contributes to and stresses this idea of Christ as human being that at the same time provides the invisible presence of the host with the visualization of the earthly body of Christ.⁵² The typology soon became widespread, and besides works known from Germany and the Italian Peninsula there are similar examples of the suffering Christ in France, Spain, and the Low Countries.⁵³ **(Fig 7)**

⁵² Fisher Annika Elisabeth, *Cross Altar and Crucifix*, 52

⁵³ Lorenzelli, *Custode dell'Immagine*, 79-87.

Corporeal Legitimacy

Theoretically, we can include the later *Descent from the Cross* groups and animated Crucifixes within the devotional context of life-sized wood sculpture that took root during the Carolingian period. However, the sculptures appearing in the early thirteenth century that are under discussion here did not initially function in association with relics, and their beginnings are tied to different concerns than those of the preceding examples. Other factors were at play that helped bring legitimacy to the life-sized, polychrome naturalistic sculptures considered here, particularly in thirteenth-century central Italy. Besides the new and increased influence of the Dominican and Franciscan orders—founded early in the century—and the rising popularity of lay confraternities, the Fourth Lateran Council established the dogma of Transubstantiation in 1215. One prominent outcome was the use of The Mass of Saint Gregory to demonstrate the Church’s confirmation of the presence and existence of Christ in the host. The narrative recounts the miracle: while “Saint Gregory was celebrating mass a woman in the congregation chuckled before the reception of communion. When he asked her how dare she laugh, she answered that she herself had baked the bread, how could she believe that God resided in it? Gregory prayed for a sign and this came in the form of a bleeding

finger.”⁵⁴ This religious story connected the ongoing controversy concerning the host’s nature to the corporeal appearance and, ultimately, authority of a pictorial representation of the body. During the later Middle Ages it began to be represented in paintings that show the miraculous moment of the Lord appearing in front of Saint Gregory—Pope Gregory I—as the Man of Sorrows surrounded by the *arma Christi*.⁵⁵ By mediating upon paintings depicting the Mass the faithful could envision Saint Gregory’s experience. As a consequence, the “image stands for the ‘real’ vision of Christ that appeared to the pope.”⁵⁶ The miraculous vision of Saint Gregory acknowledges that both artists and the Church interpreted the presence of Christ in the host showing his body, enforcing the importance and the reverence of the Eucharist. Moreover, several tales of punishment directed even towards learned priests that doubted the host could be the real body of Christ supported the position.⁵⁷

At the heart of the popularity of the Mass of Saint Gregory is the corporeal proof presented to the doubters, giving credence to the fact that the display of a body, either through painting or sculpture, was more effective proof than was the host alone. As was discussed in chapter five around the time Giotto achieves the level of naturalism that has been praised in the art historical narrative as setting off

⁵⁴ Quoted from: Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 121-122.

⁵⁵ Kathleen Kamerick, *Popular Piety and Art in the Late Middle Ages: Image Worship and Idolatry in England, 1350-1500* (New York: New Middle Ages Palgrave Firm, 2002), 169. Rubin, *Corpus Christi* 122.

⁵⁶ Kamerick, *Popular Piety*, 172.

⁵⁷ Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 122.

the Renaissance, the painted Crucifixes that had been popular in thirteenth-century Italy—such as Giotto’s *Crucifix* in Santa Maria Novella (**Fig. 7**)—wane in popularity. Increasingly, life-sized sculptural representations of Christ that, themselves, were indebted to the wooden groups of the *Descent from the Cross*, more completely fulfilled the devotional relationship of the faithful to a realistic embodiment of Christ. I contend that the naturalism of the painted crucifix gave way in popular devotion to an even more life-like representation of Christ in sculptural form, and that ultimately this development roughly coincides with the extraction of the autonomous Suffering Christ in sculptural form from the *Deposition* groups around the beginning of the fourteenth century. Whereas the legitimacy of Christ’s sculptural form was tied directly to the host in earlier medieval examples, the religious environment of central Italy in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was favorable to sculpture that relied on corporeal verisimilitude. Despite this, questions of idolatry persist, as will be seen.

The Descent from the Cross and the Development of Polychrome Sculpture in Medieval Central Italy

The composition of the *Descent from the Cross* existed already in the East, in the form of icons representing the moment right after the crucifixion and the death of Christ on the Cross. While the iconography does not change, in Europe, especially

in Italy, France, and Spain, we have sculptural examples of the Descent from the Cross. The main difference between these new sculptural groups and the previous sculptural production is that the groups of the Descent from the Cross were not meant to hold either the Host or relics and as a consequence to be considered as reliquaries. This complicates the consideration of the role of sculpture during the Medieval period and raises question concerning the devotion that developed around these objects because they completely changed the way the faithful lived and experienced the sacred.

The experience offered by these wooden groups of the Descent is physical and direct. These group sculptures (**Fig 9**) were utilized in the Holy Week, during the Passion Plays, and were also situated in the parvis of the Church. Among the obvious differences of subject and medium, the fact that these groups were situated on the parvis of the Church and used during the Passion Plays distinguishes them dramatically from icons or other kind of sculptures. In this case devotion is not only a presence and channel for the sacred but it also allows direct participation and auto identification of the spectator to the moment of the Descent. The realism of the statues' size and painted expressions of sorrow for the death of Christ allowed further access and closeness to the sacred scene. The subject of the Descent from the Cross enabled the representation of a dramatic moment from Christ's life, and adding realistic elements encouraged a realistic participation.

While these kinds of sculptures were not meant to hold relics, they did exist as freestanding sculptures in both their tri-dimensionality and action. These groups of sculptures most aptly express that Christ is not just the “Word” of scripture but its incarnation as well. The Descents from the Cross depict the humanity of Christ in its most profound manifestation; his body is accessible in his weakest moment because he is not only dead, but he is also vulnerable as he is being taken down from the cross. The scene and the relationship among the characters of the group exist in order to represent the sacred event. The movable essence of these sculptures, the possibility of sharing the space with the congregation, and their attention to detail that gave them a human-like nature all allowed the devotees to not only recognize the scene but to be with the main characters close to the body of Christ.⁵⁸

The same Descents from the Cross (**Fig 10**) had a structure that fell outside the hieratical representation of the icons or the symbolic presentation and display of the relics. Within the Descent from the Cross there is a narrative, a drama in which the beholder is invited to participate and fully be a part of it. This important aspect has not been emphasized properly.

There is a remarkable difference between the official position that supported the creation of these objects and the way they were utilized, how they were supposed to work and thus the effect they had on the faithful or beholders. In

⁵⁸ Lorenzo Carletti and Cristiano Giometti, "Medieval Wood Sculpture and its Setting in Architecture: Studies in Some Churches In and Around Pisa." *Architectural History* 46, (2003): 37-56, 37.

general in Christian art we can experience the “presence” of Christ through different media; however, we need to be aware and differentiate how the different ways of representing Christ affect the experience of Him, his life and Passion and as a consequence the behavior of the faithful.

Wooden sculptures were, of course, entangled with religious purposes: “This sort of figure is much used in the Christian religion, seeing that numberless masters have produced many crucifixes and other objects.”⁵⁹ At the same time their utilization and involvement in the cultural dimension of the popular experience of the sacred created one of the most common and long lasting preconceptions about these sculptures. In fact, historically, some aspects of popular religion and cults are considered to be the result of an illogical human behavior and thus are not considered relevant subjects of study for historians or art historians.⁶⁰

This historical prejudice has lately been revised, particularly by anthropological studies; however, within the art historical perspective there is still an issue that needs a proper solution. One of the scholars that attempted to revise the concept that “education did not correlate with status” is Caroline Walker Bynum.

⁵⁹ Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de' più Eccellenti Pittori, Scultori ed Architettori Scritte da Giorgio Vasari Pittore Aretino con Nuove Annotazioni e Commenti di Gaetano Milanesi*, (Firenze: ed. Giunti, 1568), 31. “Questa sorte di figure si è usata molto nella cristiana religione, atteso che infiniti maestri hanno fatto molti crocifissi e diverse altre cose”. See Chapter 4 on this study.

⁶⁰ David Hume, after the publication of his work *The Natural History of Religion*, 1757 (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1957), especially “Section XIII: Impious conception of the divine nature in popular religions of both kinds” and “Section XIV: Bad Influence of popular religion in morality,” affected the understanding of what we consider popular devotion since the middle of the eighteenth century. However, recent studies developed by anthropologists, historians, and art historians reevaluated popular devotion and the different dynamics within this context, and this contributed to a different and deeper comprehension and consideration of the phenomenon.

In her study *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe*, Bynum asserts that elite is not synonymous with educated and lay people not synonymous with illiterate.⁶¹ She challenged the supposition that “the culture of those who were not clergy, or not literate, or not ‘elite,’ was opposed or resistant to efforts by the powerful to impose Christian doctrine or practices upon them.”⁶² At the same time, Bynum focused on the crucial significance of Christ’s Incarnation and reviewed the concepts that approached the Middle Ages as a period trapped between superstition or exteriorized devotion.⁶³

Although this approach is a great step toward reevaluating some aspects of the Middle Ages, Bynum’s argument lacks the direct reconsideration of the sculptural medium, especially the Descent from the Cross and the animated sculptures of the Crucified Christ, as well as their role in defining materiality and devotion during the Medieval period. Scholarship has pointed out how medieval images generally reveal their “overt materiality,” and how art was able to compellingly convert earthly materials into a perception of the sacred and divine.⁶⁴ Materiality in Late Medieval Europe underscored how the “emphasis on the materials of which art is made has nothing to do with realism.”⁶⁵ For example the representation of the Virgin in Spain (referring to the example that Caroline Walker

⁶¹ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: an Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), 129.

⁶² *Ibidem.*, 129.

⁶³ *Ibidem.*, 35-36.

⁶⁴ Herbert L. Kessler, *Seeing Medieval Art* (Peterborough, Ont: Broadview Press, 2004) 19-42.

⁶⁵ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 53.

Bynum provided in her study), was not intended to look like the Jewish girl that was the real mother of Christ, but instead emphasized her decorated attire full of gems that was able to show her regality and her role as the queen of heaven.⁶⁶ The point, according to Bynum in her study *Christian Materiality*, is that:

Medieval devotional art finds itself at the opposite pole from the art of the southern or northern renaissances that followed. Renaissance artists aimed for mimetic, illusionistic modes of representation that deliberately try to trick the senses. In contrast, medieval artists expected viewers to notice and admire the stuff they employed as stuff. [...] The self-consciousness of the Renaissance playing with illusion calls attention both to the naturalism and to the “non-objectness” of art. In contrast, the self-consciousness of medieval art calls attention to its objectness.⁶⁷

In order to be effective from a devotional perspective, Medieval art, such as an image that represents Christ, the Virgin Mary, or even a saint, needed to be recognizable.⁶⁸ According to Bynum, a sculpture that was “an image of Christ or the Virgin Mary needed to be recognizable as such even recombining some iconographic elements, but still recognizable to the person represented, Christ, the Virgin Mary or

⁶⁶ Ibidem, 53.

⁶⁷ Ibidem., 53-58.

⁶⁸ Ibidem., 59.

a saint or even to an image of any of them, functioning as a sort of “relic.”⁶⁹

Moreover, Bynum stresses that “late medieval devotional images announced rather than obscure what they are made of [...] The point of the flesh in a painted medieval Madonna was not to be flesh like, nor was to obscure the wood or stone underneath; the point was for the thick, polished surface to gleam, denying the change flesh is heir to.”⁷⁰ At the same time, I argue that specifically for the animated sculptures of the crucified Christ, considering the relationship established between the sculpted body of Christ and the faithful, the intention was to recreate a lifelike and veristic representation of Christ in order to enhance this process of identification and correspondence for devotional purposes. An interesting example in this matter is the Descent from the Cross from Volterra (**Fig 11**). There is not just a display of the moment of the Passion of Christ, but an action that is shows a naturalistic idiom, presenting a sophisticated form and correspondence among the figures without altering the sacredness and the symbolic meaning of the scene. In order to critically revise these sculptures and rehabilitate them into the larger framework of art historical debate we need to focus on the sculptures first.

The most important aspect that differentiates these groups from the previous wooden sculptural production is that they were not meant to have relics and this implies a different approach in the evaluation of these objects. It is essential to point

⁶⁹ Ibidem., 59.

⁷⁰ Peter Kidson, “Architecture and the Visual Arts” in David Luscombe and Jonathan Riley-Smith (eds), *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. 4: *C. 1024-1198*, part. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 699. Quoted after Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 62.

out that since their appearance in the West between the eighth and the ninth centuries, the dynamics of creation of these wooden sculptures was the result of a choice made by the ecclesiastical authority.⁷¹ The creation and use of these objects was commissioned by authority, and thus they were part of an established official context by the Church and they were not the result of beliefs and more of popular culture. At the same time, what these wooden groups of the Descent from the Cross became in the Medieval devotional context was different from the original intention behind their production.

Initially, the wooden sculptural groups were meant to be the representation of one important scene of the Passion of Christ: the moment in which Christ was taken down from the Cross. These sculptures did not have a relic embedded, and they were not intended to be used in Mass or as part of official rites but rather a narration of one of the moments of Christ's Passion in tangible form so as that to elicit participation and closeness. The ecclesiastical authority, while controlling and managing folk practices, provided a new way of experiencing the sacred in order to attract the population under its religious hegemony.⁷² The practice of using wooden simulacra on the Italian peninsula was rooted in long-standing traditions dating to the early classical period in Rome,⁷³ a tendency that remained active in popular

⁷¹ Michele Bacci, "Le Sculture Lignee nel Folklore Religioso: Alcune Considerazioni" in *Scultura Lignea: Lucca 1200-1425*, (Firenze: Studio per Edizioni Scelte, 1995), 31.

⁷² *Ibidem.*, 31.

⁷³ Livy, for example, noted the role of sculptures representing pagan divinities in the Roman society: "From the temple of Apollo two white cows were led through the Porta Carmentalis into the city; behind these two statues in cypress wood of Juno Regina were carried." Jerry Jordan Pollit, *The Art of*

culture. Moreover, their bodily presence coordinated well with popular devotion that developed in the thirteenth century: “At La Verna in 1224 Francis’s body was said to have received the wounds of Christ’s Passion—the stigmata—and that fact, which deeply impressed his contemporaries, called attention to the body of as a vehicle of Christian spiritual experience, promoting its rediscovery as a subject for church art. More eloquently than mosaic or painting, sculpture spoke of the first Christian mystery, that of God’s Word made flesh in Christ, and artists responded to Francis’s vision of a *Dio umanato*, a God-made-human, with new attention to the body.”⁷⁴

The wooden group of the Descent from the Cross, considering this dynamic of worship and acceptance of the images, seems to fall into a new category because these sculptures, while they were meant to just represent a scene, were not only considered as proxy for the real protagonists that historically assisted at the scene; instead they were accessed by devotees in a direct emotional and physical participation, as devotees were part of them, blurring the boundaries in the relationship between the sacred and divine and the worshippers. Because of the features and size of the figure of the Virgin Mary, John, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, along with the rituals either within the liturgy or extraliturgy, the sculptures started to become real, inasmuch as that worshippers would replace the

Rome. Sources and Documents (London, 1996), 49. As quoted in Lorenzo Carletti and Cristiano Giometti, " *Medieval Wood Sculpture*," 37.

⁷⁴ Timothy Verdon, "Florence Cathedral, Renaissance Sculpture, Sacred Sculpture," in *Sculpture in the Age of Donatello*, 13-43 (p. 20).

sculptures with themselves. I argue that it was precisely because these sculptures did not contain relics that they could facilitate the access by the laity to the sacred scene in a way that was not only devotional, but rather implied identification.

From Descent from the Cross to Animated Crucifix: the Spectator and the Transformation of the Ritual Experience

While scholarship states that the Descent from the Cross went out of fashion and stopped being produced and used, I argue that believers, since they were so involved during these rituals, became by association the characters in the Descent from the cross, along with the population that assisted at the crucifixion of Christ. This implies an important shift in the relationship with the sacred. In fact, while the Church, and with this term I include the religious orders as well, was in a position to control and manage access to the sacred, this act of substitution now allowed the faithful to be a part of the sacred scene.

The production and utilization of the group of the Descent from the Cross complicated the already problematic factor of idolatry and the established relationship with the sacred, which heavily affected art production in the Middle Ages. The use of the Descent managed to avoid the direct connotations of worshipping a physical object because the sculptures representing the scene, once activated during the ritual, created a particular devotional experience. In fact the

faithful, rather than just worshipping the sculptures, were able to connect with the original event experienced through the sculptures and the present moment of the celebration.⁷⁵ As a consequence, the faithful were not worshipping the actual sculptures, which would risk the controversial problem of idolatry. Instead, they became part of the scene of the Descent. Moreover, while the use of these sculptures at the beginning had the intention of representing a scene from the Passion of Christ, in reality the sculptural medium, the staging, and the singing and recitation of the laude involved the faithful so emotionally and physically that a simple reenactment would become the 'real' moments of the Passion of Christ. The features of the characters of the Descent and the intrinsic ability to involve the faithful established a "revolutionary" affective piety for the period. I argue that specifically in the case of the use of the group of the Descent from the Cross first and the animated sculptures of the crucified Christ later, the utilization for devotional purposes transcends the relationship with the mere object.

The Descent from the Cross transformed the relationship between the worshippers and the holy figures represented. In fact the use and the function of these sculptures, and what they represent in this devotional dynamic, show the lay aspirations and needs of autonomy in relating to the sacred and the access of it. When these group sculptures were first made they were supposed to function similarly to the other images of the crucified Christ or the Virgin Mary, both in

⁷⁵ Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York : Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books ; Distributed by MIT Press, 2010), 7-19.

sculptures and painting. However, the emotion and physicality that were involved in using these sculptures contributed to unexpected outcomes that needed to be worked out jointly by the Church and the faithful.

The direct participation in the scene of the Descent from the Cross made the sculptures real; they became the real characters who participated in the Passion of Christ. Rather than signifying Christ, the Virgin Mary, John the Evangelist, Nicodemus, and Joseph of Arimathea, the sculptures had the power to become them, according to the new meaning given to these sculptures by the faithful and the laity. Both painted and sculpted images were accepted as long as they dissuaded the beholder from acknowledging the materiality of the signifier and instead pointed the beholder's attention to its transcendental value. While in the East the prototype of the representation of Christ had influence in dictating the making of images, in the West artists had more freedom. The function of teaching and instructing the illiterate disappeared from the sculptures in the Descent from the Cross. The role of the statue as a conduit to access the person represented, such as is seen in Byzantine art with icons and as promoted by the Church, ceases to apply in the actual use of to the Descent from the Cross. The Descent from the Cross embodied a new level of experience with the sacred. This new involvement by the faithful offered an occasion to be fully part of the sacred scene and promoted a new aspect of the sacred and the relationship with it. According to Hans Belting "people are disposed to venerate what is visibly before their eyes, which can only be a person

and not a narrative. Images contain moments from a narrative, although they themselves are not a narrative.”⁷⁶ I argue that the relationship that was established with these sculptural groups of the Descent is not just the usual relationship with a holy image, but rather the possibility to be part of the scene with an unprecedented access to participate in to one of the most dramatic moments of the life of Christ.

This is a pivotal idea for understanding the devotion and the sacred during the Medieval period. What was originally only part of the official liturgy officiated and controlled by the Church became instead a point of direct access and appropriation to the sacred by the lay people, because they would reach a position and metaphorically a place that belonged only to the clergy, and in some regard even beyond the clergy because the visceral relationship established between the faithful and the sculptures during these rituals was something conceptually and physically new and unexpected.

Activated in rituals, these objects provided a new religious experience and what makes it more remarkable is that these new devotional aspects were promoted by the laity. Even if the clergy had an authoritative position which allowed them to supervise and control these rituals at the same time the possibility to control and manage these changes were limited and the result was to support lay demands and actions. In addition to being life-size with an attention to bodily details, the sculptures were also freestanding. Freestanding sculptures, particularly

⁷⁶ Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago (Ill.): University of Chicago Pr, 1994), 10.

in marble and bronze, were directly associated with pagan idolatry during the Medieval period, but it seems that this understanding of idolatry was the particular result of an association between the statue and the column that supported it.⁷⁷ This is why in order to be used, along with the insertion of a relic inside, these sculptures needed to be “deactivated.” In order to do so, the sculptures were attached to the architectural framework of the Church and thus considered subordinate to it.⁷⁸ While the sculptures of the Descent were frequently part of an altar or inside a chapel and were thus part of the architectural framework, although not at all in the sense of jamb figures, they were also movable, which allowed them to live and be activated outside of their architectural context. Additionally, their tridimensionality was complete and not only frontal or three quarters.

The dynamic between the laity and the wooden sculptures certainly invokes an idolatrous relationship. However, because the use of wooden sculptures was managed through the ecclesiastical institution, and because the laity was able to find a way to channel its independent devotion through a means the Church could witness and inflect, the Church tolerated and accepted the use of the sculptures. This was also the result of a dynamic of empowerment with the sacred established by the laity: an acknowledgment that the wooden sculptures had become a very potent

⁷⁷ Alexander Nagel, *The Controversy of Renaissance Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 110.

⁷⁸ H. W. Janson “The Revival of Antiquity in Early Renaissance Sculpture” in *Looking at Italian Renaissance Sculpture*, ed by McHam, Sarah Blake (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 43.

medium in presenting the physical presence of Christ and embody in a very effective way some aspects of the Christian religion. Because of that, we cannot underestimate either the power of these wooden sculptures or the dynamics that allowed the laity and the faithful a position with access to the sacred that, before the Medieval period, was only permitted to the clergy.

Despite the Church's attempt at control, the faithful started to approach and treat these sculptures as the human body of Christ. As a consequence, the sculpture itself was worshipped and treated as such. Officially, there was supposed to be a difference between the object and the idea that the object embodied, but in reality the sculptures gained a powerful aura given by the laity that let the object itself become more of what it was supposed just to represent. This process was not outside the decrees or control of the Church, but the results of this relationship between the wooden sculpture of Christ and the faithful, as well as the power of these sculptures, are more complex than hitherto acknowledged. The power and agency of these sculptures and the bond created with the laity, I assert, has been incredibly underestimated.

The Schiavellatione and a Practical Case for the Use of Sculpture

The polychrome sculptures being investigated, which were used for both liturgical and extra liturgical functions, were fully understood to be the real physical

body of Christ and were treated as such. In Italy there are documents that attest to the diffusion of reenactments of the ending scene of the descent from the cross called *schiavellatione*,⁷⁹ literally the pulling out of the nails from the body of Christ **(Fig 12)**. This celebration was performed both inside the Church, where the clergy was responsible for it, or outside in the principal piazza,⁸⁰ in which the confraternities could have participated along with the Church. The ritual of the *schiavellatione* solved one of the major problems that Church and believers encountered during the celebrations of the passion plays and dramatic *laude*. In these celebrations a living actor sometimes played the role of Christ, particularly during the parts of the Passion preceding the crucifixion. However, after the deposition and burial, the living body of the actor could not stay still as if he were dead for the length of the ceremonies on Good Friday, and thus these animated sculptures of the crucified Christ that could work both as the crucified and perished Christ were used instead.

It is true that venerating an object, in this case a sculpture or a relic, was more appropriate than venerating the real body of an actor or a person in general.⁸¹ The most important thing here is that the real body of a person that personified Christ was completely interchangeable with an animated sculpture of Christ. Representing the true bodily presence of Christ, these sculptures were venerated

⁷⁹ Claudio Bernardi, *Theatrum Pietatis*, 12.

⁸⁰ Mario Sensi, "Fraternite Disciplinate e Sacre Rappresentazioni a Foligno nel secolo XV" in *Bollettino di Deputazione di Storia Patria per l'Umbria*, 71 (1974), 204.

⁸¹ Bernardi, *Theatrum Pietatis*, 12.

and at the same time treated as a real human body. They had the power to express the humanity of Christ and embodied the devotional needs projected by the faithful onto the sculpture. Realistic sculptures were clothed and sculptors added real human hair and beards to further dissolve the boundaries between the fictive and the real,⁸² in a very balanced combination between the material used to enhance the realism of the sculpture and the carving itself. As a consequence the sculpture manifests itself in the eyes of the faithful as Christ's body at the moment of the crucifixion and it also gained the attention of the entire religious community.

It is during the thirteenth century especially that the relationship with these sculptures, including the group of the Descent from the Cross, started to change. The period around 1215, when, as noted, the Fourth Lateran Council established the dogma of the Transubstantiation, provided even more authority to the idea of materialization of the body of Christ, even if the presence of Christ was not meant in a physical sense. While the host, which is the "real body" of Christ was still handled by the Church, establishing their exclusivity over the matter, the insertion of the host inside the sculpture involuntarily transferred this power to the sculpture. Since the sculpture in turn became the object through which the laity could access the sacred, the Church's monopoly on the sacred was challenged.⁸³ This struggle between the Church and the access of the laity and devotees to the sacred imbued

⁸² Paoletti, *Wooden Sculpture*, 86.

⁸³ Sarah Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture, and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993), 32.

even more power onto the object itself until it was perceived and treated as the human body of Christ before his Resurrection and it became the most important way to focus the devotional needs of the laity.

The literature of the period further encouraged not only an observation of Christ's suffering but also an invitation to suffer like Christ; the most interesting and famous examples are the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*. At the same time, Christ's body, in this specific case the sculpture of the crucified/dead Christ, was used and became the medium for identification.

Various aspects affected piety during the thirteenth century, such as the diffusion of the Mendicant orders, the institution of the dogma of the Transubstantiation, the outbreak of the Flagellants movement in Perugia in 1260, and the development and dissemination of the lay confraternities. While the wooden crucifixion of Christ was not the only way to express and address devotional needs during the thirteenth century, at the same time these sculptures did indeed become an embodiment and representation of the human side of Christ.

Alterations and Substitutions to Polychrome Sculpture

During the Middle Ages theologians focused on the problem of idolatry, trying to justify the uses of and relationship with images. The same concerns on idolatry did not necessarily occur with these sculptures. It is only later, in the

periods of the Reformation and Counter Reformation, that the roles and power of these sculptures were confronted during the Pastoral Visits by the bishops in the different Dioceses of Italy. These visits were the responsibility of the bishop and were increasingly important during and after the Council of Trent. The aims of these visits were “to lead to sound and orthodox doctrine, by banishing heresies; to maintain good morals, and to correct such as are evil; to animate the people, by exhortations and admonitions, to religion, peacefulness, and innocence; and to establish such other things as to the prudence of the visitors shall seem for the profit of the faithful, according as time, place and opportunity shall allow”⁸⁴. In some cases, the wooden sculptures, either from the Descent from the Cross or the Crucifix, are mentioned during these pastoral visits, providing information about their original context and place, and giving a historical perspective of the objects themselves.

On the other hand, the visiting bishop (and sometimes his vicars), acting on behalf of the Council of Trent, would sometimes request the removal of paintings, frescos, or sculptures if they were found to be too old or unseemly. The removal of these pieces was one of the main concerns of the bishops during the pastoral visits, which served to check that the smaller churches were respecting the decrees⁸⁵. Images or sculptures that looked old and worn out, or that were worshipped by a cult that did not fall under the orthodoxy that the church supported during the

⁸⁴ “On Reformation Decree.” *The Council of Trent*. <http://www.thecounciloftrent.com/ch24.htm> (Accessed Jan. 22, 2014).

⁸⁵ Elvio, Lunghi, “La Scultura Ligneata in Umbria nel XIII Secolo” in *L'Umbria nel XIII Secolo*. (Spoleto: Fondazione Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 2010), 306.

Council of Trent, were considered inappropriate. For example, documentation of the pastoral visit of Pietro de Lunel mentions how some cults related to Christ as *Volto Santo* developed in Umbria, and he pointed out ten sculptures of the crucified Christ that were adorned with white robes and crowns. While in some cases he asked for only for the removal of the robe or the crown; in others, such as in the church of San Salvatore in Norcia in the south of Umbria, he ordered for the sculpture of the crucified Christ to be burnt and the ashes to be preserved in the shrine of the church.⁸⁶ There are many examples that refer to the destruction of sculptures because they were considered to be *vetustate consumptas*: worn out by time. Though it is unfortunate that these sculpture were destroyed, knowledge of their destruction can give us a better idea of the real number and diffusion of these wooden sculptures not only in Umbria but, specifically for this study, in the center of Italy.

In some cases, the documentation of these pastoral visits provides details with which we can make inferences about the use of these sculptures and the relationship between the sculptures and the faithful in liturgical situations. In the documentation of the pastoral visit of Pietro Camaini to the small, central town of Collazone, he remarks how a sculpture of the crucified Christ needed to be removed because it was extremely old and deformed and because its size obscured visibility

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, 312.

of the decoration on the walls.⁸⁷ However, this sculpture was still present in a further pastoral visit in 1597; it was described in this case also as “antiquissima et magna ac deformis,” that is “very old, huge and deformed.” A further description of this sculpture added a little detail that suggests a probable use of this sculpture; “pulcherrima imago Crucifixi super altari existens, in vultu, et pedibus corrosa er admodum deformata,” a beautiful image of crucified Christ, above the existent altar that was worn out in the feet and the face and also deformed⁸⁸. A second note in different handwriting said that the above-mentioned sculpture was eventually burned. If the images were ruined because they were old or worn out and were not in the restorable condition, they were destroyed or substituted with new images.⁸⁹

The crucial information in this description is that the sculpture was worn out especially in the face and the feet. We can assume from this description that these kinds of sculptures of the crucified Christ were actively used for liturgical purposes, and were likely touched on the face and feet as a sign of reverence and devotion. In this case, the pastoral visit documentation offers information that helps to understand how these objects were used, even if the use is not mentioned explicitly.

⁸⁷ Todi, Archivio Vescovile (AVT), *Visita Apostolica Camaiani*, c. 265r: “... et cum reperiatur in maiori eius altari constituta quedam magna antiquissima, ac deformis statua Crucifixi D. N. que cooperiendo noviter, ac eleganter depictas sacras Imagines in Tribuna minuit ecclesiasticum decorum, iussit inde removeri, et in alio loco ut coram expositum est, collocari...”. As quoted in Elvio Lunghi, *La Scultura Lignea in Umbria nel XIII Secolo*, 299-331.

⁸⁸ Todi, Archivio Vescovile, *Liber Tudertine Diocesis 1597*, c. 192r.

⁸⁹ Assisi, Archivio Vescovile (AVA), *Visita Apostolica Camaiani della Diocesi di Assisi*, c. 471v: “Quantum ad doctrinam spectat, res a Praedicatoribus pie, et catholice declaratae est, quantum vero ad picturas ipsas, quaedam imagines, quae alicui lascivae et indecora pictae erant sunt emendatae, quaedam vetustate ita corrupta, ut restaurari non possint, abolitae sunt, et novae imagines ubi fuit opportunum depictae...”. Lunghi, *La Scultura in Umbria*, 299-331.

Considering other cases and according to more careful descriptions, we can infer that some sculptures were worn down by devotional use and not simply because they were old.

Though more rare, there are some additional descriptions of pastoral visits that condemned the incorrect behavior of the pilgrims and devotees that arrived at the sanctuary to worship the sculptures.⁹⁰ Specifically, there is the case of the pastoral visit of Camaini who found in the church of Santa Maria in Collazone, a city near Todi in Umbria, some activities linked to the worship of the Virgin Mary that were very close to what we can consider superstition (versus the orthodoxy guaranteed by the church).⁹¹ While these pastoral visits affected all the churches of the Dioceses, they did not affect the churches that belonged to the Mendicant Orders that were not required to apply all the decrees promulgated by the Council of Trent⁹². However, most of these wooden groups of the Descent from the Cross were found in cathedrals, Benedictine abbeys, or city churches and rural churches. There is no information of the presence of these groups in the Mendicant Orders churches, while animated sculptures of the Crucified Christ can be found in Franciscan churches (**Fig 13**) or even in religious complexes run by the Dominicans (**Fig 14**). We are able to better understand the power of these images from the accounts of

⁹⁰ Lunghi, *La Scultura Lignea*, 314.

⁹¹ AVT, *Visita Apostolica Camaiani*, c. 266v: “.. et cum adsit aliud altare cum Imagine satis devota eiusdem Gloriosissime Virginis, Cavendum est ob populi concursum a superstitionis labe, ac appensione sordidorum panniculorum excitando fideles ad sinceram religionis pietatem pro impetranda sue genitricis apud Deum intercessione...”. Lunghi, *La Scultura Lignea in Umbria*, 299-331.

⁹² Lunghi, *La Scultura Lignea*, 314.

these pastoral visits. The fact that several, if not many, of these sculptures were destroyed or dismissed according to the current decree of the Church shows two aspects of the problem. The first is that these sculptures did not comply with the current and official decree of the Church. The second is that since the beginning of their production these sculptures embodied a power and a role in devotional society of the late Medieval period that was something unique and peculiar.

While at first under control by the ecclesiastical authority, the power and role of these sculptures was soon absorbed and appropriated by the laity, which contributed to the sculpture's power to become and be acknowledged as an embodiment of the human side of Christ. We cannot address and consider wooden sculptures to be examples of idolatry. At the same time, the role that these sculptures acquired in the late Medieval period is very peculiar and unlike other artworks that portray Christ, the Virgin Mary, or the Saints. They became the center of devotion and access to the sacred that changed the ways to experience and portray the Passion of Christ through this sculptural form of his body. The imitation of Christ that was at the core of Franciscan devotion was possible also because sculptures of the crucified/dead Christ rendered his physical suffering tangible and allowed an easier identification.

Devotion, Art, and Medium: the Case of Lando di Pietro's Crucifix

An example demonstrating the power these sculptures reached and the lingering concern of idolatry is Lando di Pietro's *Crucifix*. In 1338, the Sienese artist Lando di Pietro completed a wooden Crucifixion. The life-size wooden image of Christ belonged to the Compagnia di San Domenico in Camporegio, and after the Compagnia was suppressed in 1785 it was relocated to the Convent of the Osservanza and placed above the main altar of the church. This polychrome wooden sculpture has attracted the attention of scholars because of its highly naturalistic style.

While the sculpture was already considered exceptional, a discovery made in 1944 proved particularly fascinating to scholars. During the bombing of Siena at the end of the Second World War (**fig 15**), the sculpture was broken into pieces. The damage revealed a piece of parchment that Lando di Pietro had hidden in the hollow of Christ's knee (**Fig 16**), bearing the date and name of the artist and in which he commended himself and his soul to God. A second larger parchment was discovered in the sculpture's head (**Fig 17**) containing the author's name, date, and a prayer. The date written on the parchment found in the hollow of Christ's knee is January 1337, (modern dating 1338).⁹³

⁹³ Catherine King "Effigies: Human and Divine," in *Siena, Florence and Padua: Art, Society and Religion 1280-1400*, Eds Diana Norman. (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press in association with the

In the small parchment found in the knee, there is a prayer (**Fig 18**) which reads, “Jesus Christ through your mercy let the soul of the goldsmith Lando di Pietro, who made this crucifix, be recommended.” The second handwritten parchment by Lando was found inside the head of Christ and presents a longer and more articulated prayer in which he states his intentions as well (**Fig 19**): “The Lord God made it possible for Lando di Pietro of Siena to carve this crucifix in this wood in the likeness of the real Jesus to remind people of the passion of Jesus Christ Son of God, and of the Virgin Mary; therefore you true and holy cross of Jesus Christ Son of God, render the said Lando to God”⁹⁴ The prayer continues, asking the Virgin, Saint John the Evangelist, Saint John the Baptist, Mary Magdalene, and all the saints, specifically “men and women,” to recommend Lando to God. He also asks the saints to have “mercy on all of human generation.” On the right side of the parchment he added something more: “In the year of our Lord January 1337 this figure was completed in the likeness of Jesus Christ crucified Son of God living and true. And it is he one must adore and not this wood”.

On the parchment found inside the hollow part of the knee the prayer highlights how the artist hopes that making this cross will help him reach heaven.⁹⁵ The practice of an artist writing a prayer to recommend his soul to God or the Virgin Mary was not uncommon in fourteenth-century Tuscany. A familiar example is the

Open University, 1985), 271. This discrepancy exists because at that time in Italy, the year began on the Feast of the Annunciation, March 25

⁹⁴ Ibidem., 125.

⁹⁵ Ibidem., 127.

Maestà by Duccio di Buoninsegna (**Fig 20**). At the bottom of the Virgin's throne there is an inscription that reads (**Fig 21**): "Holy Mother of God, be thou the cause of peace for Siena and life to Duccio because he painted thee thus."⁹⁶ As in Lando's prayer, Duccio recommend himself to the Virgin Mary because he painted the altarpiece and did so in such a beautiful and skilled manner. In the second prayer (**Fig 22**), found in the head of the crucifix, Lando di Pietro brings up other aspects of his faith and his artistic creation and also important details about the object itself.

At the beginning of the prayer Lando uses the word "*likeness*," which implies that a painted, wooden life-size sculpture had the power to produce the most convincing representations of divine nature.⁹⁷ When Lando says, "you true and holy cross of Jesus Christ" it is unclear whether he is referring to the real Cross or to the Crucifix he just made. (**Fig 23**) In fact, while the English translation of the prayer has used the words "Crucifixion" and "Cross," thus making a clear distinction between the two, in the original version Lando di Pietro used the word "Croce" - "Cross" in both cases.

However, the cross itself is the medium through which Lando recommends himself to God. Lando's intention is to remind viewers of the Passion, but considering the high quality and uniquely realistic appearance of the sculpture, he foresees a risk that it will become more than a visual prompt for the faithful and

⁹⁶ Florens Deuchler, *Duccio* (Milano, Electa Editrice: 1984), 56. **MATER S/ANCTA DEI/ SIS CAUSA SENIS REQUIEI / SISI DUCIO VITA / TE QUIA PINXIT ITA)**

⁹⁷ Catherine King "Effigies: Human and Divine", 127.

instead lead viewers to worship it as if it were Christ himself. The devout were only allowed to venerate what were believed to be fragments of the true cross, or other objects such as the shroud or the nails of the cross. However, as often happened during the late Medieval period, the wooden sculpture became the real body of Christ.

This concept of wooden sculptures becoming the representation of the human side of Christ is the result of the artists' skills in creating an affective rendering of the body and also to acquired status given by the laity to these objects once activated for ritual functions. Specifically for this case, Lando seems to register that the very verisimilitude he and other artists employed to make the suffering of Christ vivid for devotees might also lead the faithful to mistake the simulacrum as an embodiment and representation of the human side of Christ. Within this widespread devotional context, physicality became an important means and access to the divine.⁹⁸ As a consequence, Lando in his prayer might have referred to the Christ he made and specifically he could have referred to his skills as a artist to be the trigger for faithful to activate the object as the real body of Christ.

This supposition is supported by a note that Lando added on the right side of the parchment that says, "this figure was completed in the likeness of Jesus Christ crucified Son of God living and true. And it is He that one must adore and not this

⁹⁸ Caroline Walker-Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), esp. Chaps 4 and 5. As quoted in Pamela H. Smith, *The Body of the Artisan*, (University of Chicago Press, 2004), 10.

wood.” Lando urges worshippers to not idolize a work that was the result of devotion and prayer. Considering the nature of the note, he could have referred to himself as well, after realizing that within a devotional context a convincing representation of Christ could become and be treated as if he were the crucified body of Christ. What Lando di Pietro wrote can be considered as something to celebrate and elevate himself, but really showed, through his devotion, his great skill as artist. Conversely, considering that these parchments were found after the sculpture was destroyed, it seems that the artist never intended for them to be seen, and thus Lando would have been the only person aware of his act of faith. Thus, his prayers were genuinely written with real and devout sentiment.

The most problematic issue was the sculpture itself and its capability to be perceived as the real Christ, and the subsequent risk of confusing the “piece of wood” with the body of Christ. Lando’s exhortation to adore Christ and not the wood represents a general attitude toward these sculptures and underlines the fact that it was not just a sculpture, a visual means through which to reach God, but a materialization of the presence and body of Christ. Also, specifically in relation to the issue of *idolatry*, the fact that Lando specifies that believers should not adore the “piece of wood” implies that the object’s veneration muddled the distinction between the sculpture and what it was supposed to represent and portray, which is Christ. The sculpture became the focus and the physical center of devotion, putting itself in a new blurred dimension. While we might not agree with the view that was

held from the diffusion of Christianity until the Medieval period that this is *idolatry*, we need to be responsive to the importance and power these objects held, especially since the late Medieval period.

The discovery of Lando di Pietro's note inside his Crucifix addresses another important issue related to these sculptures. According to what is left of Lando's Crucifix, we acknowledge his skills as a sculptor although he addressed himself as *orafo* (goldsmith).⁹⁹ The Crucifix is of great quality, but through Lando's prayer it is clear that his reference to the Cross and the warning against worshipping the "piece of wood" refers to the sculpture itself.

Lando is here referring to the common and frequent attitude toward these objects that goes beyond the intrinsic aesthetic qualities of the sculptures themselves. This is important because one of the most prominent problems in studying these sculptures is that they have not been considered as artworks both by faithful and recent scholars, but just as devotional objects. According to parameters established in the classical canon of beauty, the occasional low aesthetic quality of these sculptures frequently condemns them still today to academic oblivion. This attitude began with Vasari and has since led to a great misunderstanding of these objects that has affected them in a negative way. My intention is to challenge the idea that these sculptures were just devotional objects made out of painted wood.

⁹⁹ Catherine King, *Effigies: Human and Divine*, 271.

Medieval Renaissance: the polychrome wooden Crucifix in the Quattrocento

This chapter began with one of the most famous anecdotes about polychrome, wooden sculpture: Vasari's account of the *Crucifixes* by Donatello and Brunelleschi. Since the beginning of the use of the group of the Descent from the Cross, one of the most common features of these wooden sculptures was compelling verisimilitude to reflect and, above all, satisfy the devotional need of the believers. The animated sculptures of the crucified Christ were particularly meant to create a direct and sympathetic relationship with the devotees, which in turn allowed the faithful to be able to identify themselves with the human and suffering sides of Christ. These sculptures were meant to represent Christ, and once activated they were able to personify the real body of Christ despite but also because of inherently aesthetic qualities.

Donatello's *Crucifix* is an emblem of this visual and devotional culture. What has been addressed as exaggerated naturalism, the agony in the eyes and the open mouth to emphasize pain, in reality was the key to accessing and relating to the body of Christ in a more sympathetic way. Vasari's anecdote, as is often the case, privileges rhetorical fiction over historical fact. Instead of the "months" that separate Brunelleschi's sculptural response from Donatello's work, documents suggest that the two crucifixes were executed about ten years apart from each

other.¹⁰⁰ More importantly, however, is the influence that Vasari's telling of the event has affected the subsequent understanding and appreciation of these objects.

Donatello's sculpture was not as praised or considered to be as "perfect" as Brunelleschi's *Crucifix*. However, despite the apparent and evident aesthetic distinctions, I contend that the main point on which to evaluate these crucifixes is their context and use. Historically, the value of these wooden sculptures has been based on their aesthetic qualities, which negatively affects the judgment and the value of these objects. In order to fully understand these wooden sculptures, their functions need to be considered in conjunction with their aesthetic qualities.

Brunelleschi did not think of Donatello's *Crucifix* as the real Christ but instead saw the figure as a farmer; this disconnect occurred because Christ's body was believed to be "delicatissimo, et in tutte le parti il piu perfetto homo che nascesse già mai".¹⁰¹ Both Donatello and Brunelleschi's *Crucifixes* are, in their own ways, the real body of Christ, and they need to be evaluated as such in conjunction with their functions and not only through aesthetic categories.

Even with this idea of perfection, according to Vasari's report, Brunelleschi's *Crucifix* can relate to the viewer in two ways. The first is from a distance that presents him in perfect proportion, and the second very close to the viewer, in

¹⁰⁰ To see the chronology of both sculptures see for Brunelleschi: Eugenio Battisti and Filippo Brunelleschi, *Filippo Brunelleschi: the Complete Work* (New York: Rizzoli, 1981), 344. For Donatello: H. W. Janson, and Jenö Lányi, *The Sculpture of Donatello*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 7-12.

¹⁰¹ Vasari, *Le Vite*, 195.

which the beholder can experience the frailty of Christ's suffering.¹⁰² Even if Brunelleschi's *Crucifix* embodied this idea of proportion and perfection, his rendering of Christ still belongs and resonates with human experience and suffering. The fact that the same *Crucifix* was made with a loincloth covering his genitalia shows once again the attempt to soften the boundaries between what supposed to be ideal and real, and what was fictive and true. It was common to sculpt the loincloth as part of the sculpture, but wanting to use a real one shows the attempt to consider the sculpture more as a real person and enhance this idea of verisimilitude.

If we consider the *Crucifixes* by Donatello and Brunelleschi as examples with which to reevaluate these sculptures, we note that in both cases they created a connection with the viewer; the Donatello crucifix has movable arms and therefore provides a physical connection, whereas the Brunelleschi crucifix's loincloth brings his bodily dimension to a human level. Above all, they both express what these sculptures came to embody and represent through time, the real body of Christ.

The fact that Brunelleschi's *Crucifix*, unlike other crucifixes, does not show gruesome wounds or the tormented body on the cross **(Fig 24)** does not mean that these sculptures ceased to represent the real body and presence of Christ. Despite various changes in style of rendering Christ on the cross from the medieval period to the Renaissance, the idea of the wooden sculpture as the real body of Christ did not change. In fact, during the fifteenth century we can presume, according to the

¹⁰² Roger Tarr, "Brunelleschi and Donatello: Placement and Meaning in Sculpture," in *Artibus et Historiae*. 32 (1995), 116.

extant examples, a large production and continuity of both polychrome wooden sculptures of the crucified Christ as well as animated ones.¹⁰³ This shows that polychrome wood was the most effective medium even during the fifteenth century to provide the essence and presence of Christ through his human form. The sculptures functioned for the faithful to contemplate over his body in liturgical or extraliturgical ceremonies.

The human figure held an important role in unifying the stories represented in the fifteenth century, but the figure of Christ was an exception.¹⁰⁴ In fact, during the fifteenth century many relied on what was believed to be a Governor of Judea's eyewitness account of Jesus's appearance, who reported it to the Roman Senate. The Governor describes Jesus's physical features and behavior, and ends his description mentioning how "he [Jesus] is the most beautiful among the children of men."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ To have an idea of the catalog about the extant wooden sculptures of the crucified Christ see: Gesine, and Johannes Taubert, "Mittelalterliche Kruzifixe mit Schwenkbaren Armen: ein Beitrag zur Verwendung von Bildwerken Inder Liturgie". *Zeitschrift Des Deutschen Vereins Für Kunstwissenschaft / Deutscher Verein Für Kunstwissenschaft*, (1969): 79-121. Margrit Lisner, *Holzkruzifixe in Florenz und in der Toskana von der Zeit um 1300 bis zum frühen Cinquecento* (München: Bruckmann, 1970). Giovanna Saponi and Bruno Toscano, *La Deposizione Ligneia in Europa: l'Immagine, il Culto, la Forma*, (Milan: Electa, 2004). Kamil Kopania, *Animated Sculptures of the Crucified Christ in the Religious Culture of the Latin Middle Ages* (Warszawa: Wydawn. "Neriton", 2010). John T. Paoletti, "Wooden Sculpture in Italy as Sacral Presence." In *Artibus et Historiae*, vol 13, no 26 (1992): 85-100.

¹⁰⁴ Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy; a Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 56.

¹⁰⁵ Ibidem., 57. This is the account according to the fictitious Lentulus, Governor of Judea: "A man of average and moderate height, and very distinguished. He has an impressive appearance, so that those who look on him love and fear him. His hair is the colour of a ripe hazel-nut. It falls straight almost to the level of his ears; from there down it curls thickly and is rather more luxuriant, and this hangs down to his shoulders. In front his hairs is parted into two, with the parting in the centre in the Nazarene manner. His forehead is wide, smooth and serene, and his face is without wrinkles or any marks. It is graced by a slightly reddish tinge, a faint colour. His nose and mouth are faultless. His beard is thick and like a young man's first beard, of the same colour as his hair; it is not particularly long and is parted in the middle. His aspect is simple and mature. His eyes are brilliant, mobile, clear,

Thus, artists were not as free in representing the figure of Christ as they could be with other figures or characters. The fact that Christ was considered *the most beautiful among the children of men* challenged the artists to represent the perfect body. Brunelleschi's *Crucifix* is the result of an attentive study of anatomy and proportions insomuch as it became a paradigmatic figure of perfection, similarly to the later *Vitruvian Man* by Leonardo da Vinci.

The task of representing the body of Christ in the fifteenth century was an opportunity to express a supreme and perfect body, both in terms of proportions and anatomy and as a chance for artists to showcase their skill in creating such a perfect body.¹⁰⁶ As a consequence, other artists along with Donatello and Brunelleschi tested themselves in this endeavor; there are several known artists that made a wooden Crucifix, such as Michelangelo (**Fig 25**), Giuliano da Sangallo (**Fig 26**), Francesco da Sangallo (**Fig 27**), Antonio da Sangallo (**Fig 28**), Benedetto da Maiano (**Fig 29**), Michelozzo, Antonio del Pollaiuolo, Baccio da Montelupo, Andrea del Verrocchio. Despite Vasari's assertion that it was impossible to give that "flesh-like appearance and softness to wood that can be given to metal and to marble and

splendid. He is terrible when he reprehends, quiet and kindly when admonishes. He is quick in his movements but always keeps his dignity. No one ever saw him laugh, but he has been seen to weep. He is broad in the chest and upstanding; his hands and arms are fine. In speech he is serious, sparing and modest. He is the most beautiful among the children of men".

¹⁰⁶ Giancarlo Gentilini, *Proposta per Michelangelo Giovane: un Crocifisso in Legno di Tiglio* (Torino: U. Allemandi, 2004), 15.

to the sculptured objects that we see in stucco, wax, or clay,¹⁰⁷ artists continued to make sculptures of the crucified Christ with polychrome wood. I argue that this was not only the result of a personal effort to show their own artistic skills among their peers and intellectuals of the period. It was also an awareness by the artists that the wooden interpretation of the body of Christ was the quintessential way to relate to a real body, especially because these sculptures were perceived as the true and physical presence of Christ.

The use of the wooden sculpture to represent a body perceived as “perfect” was also the result of the value given to these sculptures that were acknowledged as the real physical body of Christ. The religious community, especially since the late Medieval period, established a relationship with the wooden sculpture of the Crucifix that gave the object the power and aura to represent and embody the crucified human body of Christ. As a consequence, the artists who made these Crucifixes needed to conform to the current theories of the period and have an awareness of how these Crucifixes were used and perceived. I assert that the idea of the body in its physical essence was more important than the ideas of beauty established during the Renaissance.

In fact, Vasari’s anecdote about Donatello and Brunelleschi’s *Crucifixes* contains elements that support my assertion. It refers to *Crucifixes* that were part of

¹⁰⁷ Vasari, Maclehorse, *Vasari on Technique*, 173. Vasari, *Le Vite*, Cap III, 31. “dare al legno quella carnosità o morbidezza che al metallo ed al marmo et all’altre sculture che noi veggiamo, e di stucchi o di cera o di terra.”

two of the most important churches in Florence. Donatello's was in the Franciscan church of Santa Croce, while Brunelleschi's was in the Dominican church of Santa Novella. Both *Crucifixes* must have fully satisfied religious necessities in order to be used by two of the most influential religious orders of the period. The *Crucifix* by Donatello was made in order to stress the human emotion and suffering of Christ, thus satisfying the devotional needs of the Franciscans who were interested in affecting representations of Christ in order to elicit a sympathetic reaction by the beholders and faithful. This intention explains the features of Donatello's *Crucifix*; which were believed to be an aesthetic issue that did not match the mathematical harmony of Brunelleschi; in reality, it was not an issue at all. I argue that Donatello's *Crucifix* had a different function and need to represent a different aspect of the idea, presence, and physicality of the body of Christ. The paradox is that one does not exclude the other. Both crucifixes by Donatello and Brunelleschi are a different aspect of the idea of the body of Christ, but it is the wooden sculpture that makes them the real body of Christ.

The *Crucifixes* were made for different religious orders and to execute specific functions, but both were an embodiment of the human side of Christ. No matter how and where these wooden *Crucifixes* were made, they all embodied this physical presence. This is why we find a multitude of wooden *Crucifixes* in different churches or oratories of various Confraternities. If we consider the city of Florence, we find life-size crucifixes in Santa Maria Nuova in the Convent of Oblate, in the

church of Santissima Annunziata, in Santa Maria del Fiore, in Saint Onofrio, in San Lorenzo, in the Convent of the Calza, in Santo Spirito, and also in the Confraternity of the Misericordia.¹⁰⁸

Though they were used in different contexts, all churches, whether convents or oratories, and faithful viewed these sculptures as the simulacrum of the bodily presence of Christ. We can expand the list by adding all the churches in Italy that contain a wooden life-size Crucifix. Though there are remarkable differences in the style, place, and period in which these sculptures were made, we need to recognize that a crucifix in a tiny church in the outskirts of Tuscany had the same power to fully represent and be venerated as the real Christ as a sculpture by Brunelleschi or Donatello. These objects need to be evaluated and understood in a dialogical way with both the clergy and the believers that activated them. We must understand that this relationship goes beyond the official canon of beauty established by scholarship throughout time.

Caesarius of Heisterbach provides an instructive account from around the early thirteenth century. In it, a woman compares the *ugly* wooden Madonna with a detachable Child in the church at Veldenz in the Rhineland to old rubbish. Accordingly, the woman was properly punished for her comments.¹⁰⁹ Despite the purely aesthetic judgment of the woman, the authority and power of the sculpture

¹⁰⁸ Gentilini, *Proposta per Michelangelo*, 11-32.

¹⁰⁹ Jacob Burckhardt and Peter Humfrey, *The Altarpiece in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 22.

itself was not affected; on the contrary it was the woman that was punished for her comments. This demonstrates that the power of and respect for these sculptures went beyond the mere aesthetic dimension, as well as their powerful role once activated as devotional objects.

The “lives” of the various *Crucifixes*—from the late Middle Ages through the Renaissance, and continuing until the moment of the Counter Reformation—experienced ever-changing receptions, adapting to new contexts from the in which they were originally made. At the same time there was one unifying idea promoted by the faithful: that the wooden sculpture of the crucified Christ would become the true bodily presence of Christ,¹¹⁰ resulting from an act of appropriation by the laity through use of and identification with these wooden statues. There is an urgent need to underline the role and importance of the wooden sculptures of the Crucified Christ since the diffusion and use of the Descent from the Cross. The complexity of these objects extends beyond their devotional use and incorporates how believers since the late Medieval period related to the sacred and, above all, to the figure and body of Christ.

The Church assisted to the whole process and somehow tolerated these devotional dynamics between the laity, sculptures, and rituals, even though they never took on an official position until during the Counter Reformation, at which

¹¹⁰ The Church officially privileged the presence of Christ in the Eucharist over any other form. The use of the sculptures that became and represented the real body and presence of Christ, even without the insertion of a relic or a host inside the sculpture, is the result of the development of lay devotion and the relationship that faithful established with these sculptures. The Church tolerated this devotional dynamic between the faithful and the sculptures until the crisis of the Reformation.

point they repressed most of these aspects of the devotion developed around these sculptures during the Medieval period. The aesthetic qualities that art history traditionally used to study different art periods cannot be fully applied to these wooden sculptures. A similar revision needs to occur surrounding the concept of idolatry. Even if the way these sculptures are utilized can be associated with what is described as idolatry, especially during the late Medieval period and early Renaissance, we need to be aware that the Church permitted that. This occurred because the wooden sculptures met the devotional lay demands and above all through these sculptures the laity reached an empowerment in this new relationship with the sacred that the Church could not oppose but only tolerate and validate. Moreover, despite the complexity of the relationship established between the faithful and these sculptures that could be addressed as idolatrous, at the same time these objects became the real focus of late Medieval devotion and dramatically shaped the understanding of and relationship with the sacred, with the presence of Christ and the coeval art production.

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